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THE BLACK COCKATOO

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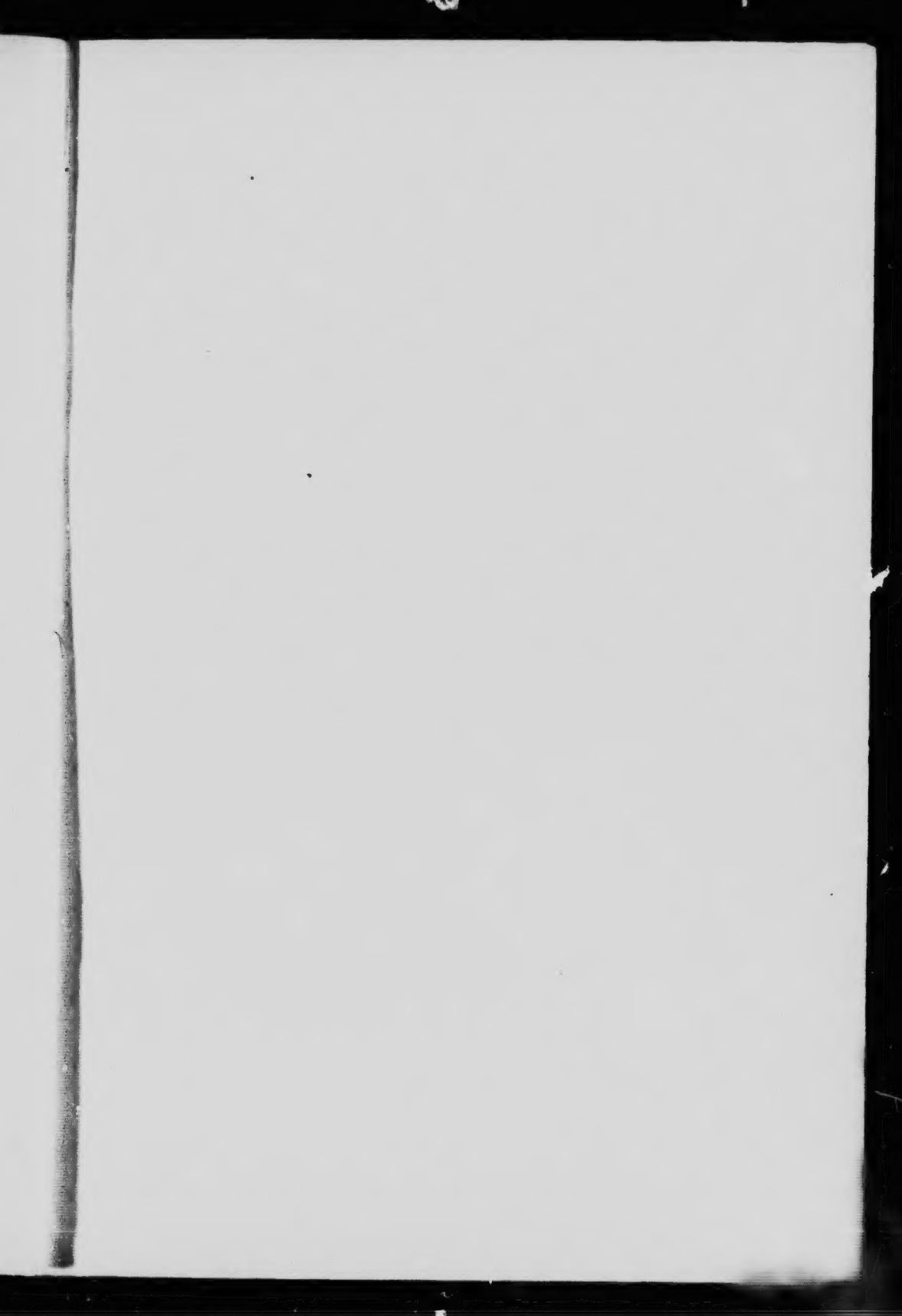
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THE POOR TERROR-STRICKEN BLACKS SIMPLY GROVELLED
BEFORE THEM.

[See page 190.]

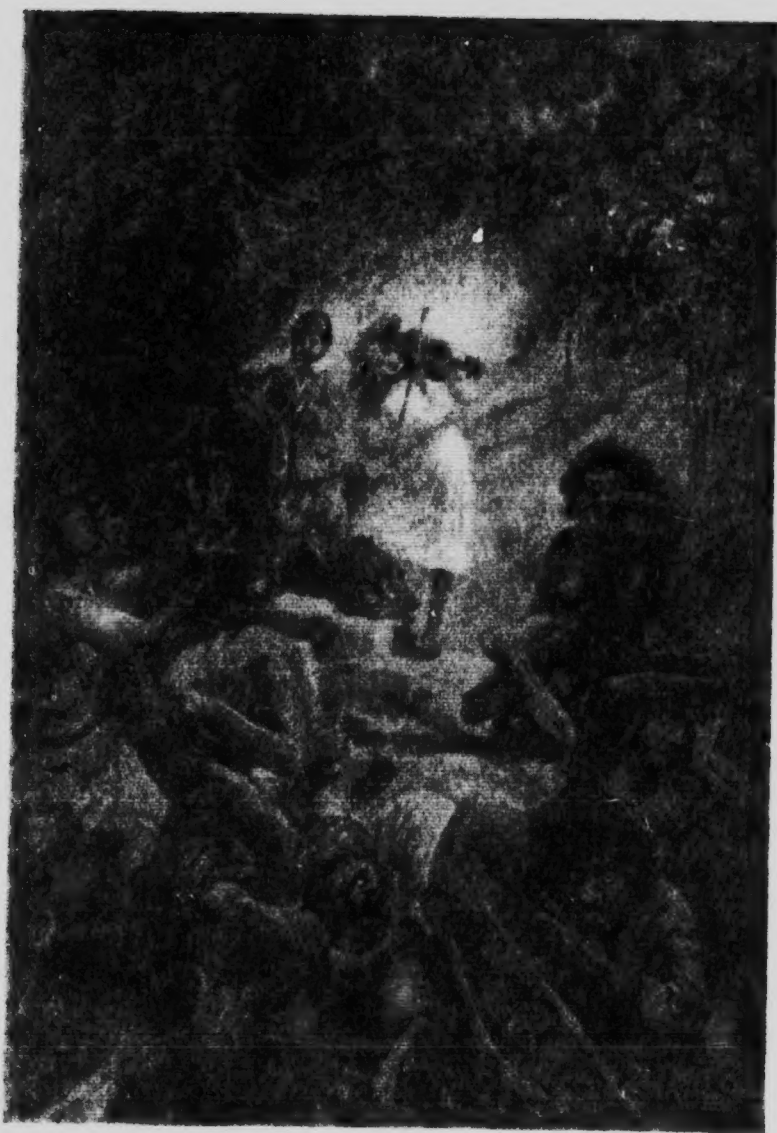
THE
BLACK COCKATOO

A STORY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

BY
BESSIE MARCHANT

WITH COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS BY
LANCELOT SPEED

LONDON
THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY
4 BOUVERIE STREET AND 65 ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD, E.C.



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THE BLACK COCKATOO

CHAPTER I

THE CATTLE-DUFFER'S BABY

IT was one night when their father had gone to Geraldstown, that the Paynter children determined to give a party.

The nearest juvenile neighbours of their own colour lived fifteen miles away, and Mrs. Paynter did not allow them to play with the children of the blacks squatting on the Woolla Run, so when they gave a party they had to be hosts and guests themselves, dividing into two parties and playing each in turn.

In spite of this they always had great fun at their entertainments, enjoying themselves perhaps all the more because the success of everything depended upon their own efforts at making merry.

There were six of them all told, but Joyce

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was so grown-up, past eighteen in fact, that she could hardly be said to count. Stevie, too, was fifteen, and because he had so much hard work to do thought himself almost a man, and quite above such childish pleasures as delighted the others.

The rest, however, Bertha aged thirteen, and Ellie eleven, with the two boys, Tom and Dodge, whose years numbered nine and seven respectively, put all their hearts into their play, and so of course made a great success of it.

Their father being absent and their mother in consequence too busy and absorbed in farming cares to be much with them, they determined on this occasion to have a festivity of an unusually splendid character.

There was a big shed at the back of the house, sometimes used for storing wool, but just now quite empty, and this was chosen as the best place for the fun.

It was Bertha's turn to be hostess, and with Dodge for a helper she rushed out to the shed directly Joyce had freed them from lessons. This by great good fortune happened to be half an hour earlier than usual, for Mrs. Paynter having ridden out with Stevie to the sheep lodge

The Cattle-Duffer's Baby

at Bandicoot Gully, Joyce had supper to cook, and so was glad to shorten the afternoon lessons.

The shed was very dusty, but that did not matter, since both hosts and guests were clad in stout but serviceable brown holland.

Two empty flour barrels were rolled into the shed and placed at one end, an old door, luckily off its hinges, was by a great effort lifted and laid on the top, for although Bertha was a big girl, Dodge was a remarkably small boy, who found the lifting very awkward and beyond his strength.

However, they managed it somehow, covering the improvised table with newspapers for a cloth. They soon had a goodly array of empty meat tins and pickle-bottles arranged to represent silver and crystal dishes and jars. Then the tins were filled with oranges, bananas, chunks of damper, bits of dried meat, some cold boiled potatoes left over from breakfast and purloined from the pantry, and a liquid messy compound like thin starch, with bits of dark-coloured substance floating in it, which figured on the menu cards as nugget souffle, and had been manufactured by Bertha as a special treat.

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"The earl and countess will just turn green with envy, Dodgie dear, when they see our spread!" exclaimed Bertha, dancing round on the tips of her toes as she surveyed the table, pausing in her whirling performance to straighten a spray of wattle bloom that was stuck in a pickle-bottle for the adornment of the board.

"Won't they just wonder what the nugget-snuffles is made of?" said Dodge, who had been tasting with the tip of his finger, and was now sucking it with an air of grave appreciation.

"Souffle, not snuffles; oh, Dodgie, Dodgie, when will you remember?" cried Bertha, trying to look shocked but almost laughing outright.

Dodge had a most persistent habit of mispronouncing everything. It was he who had invented his own strange title, that being his way of pronouncing George, which was his real name, and by which he had been called until he was old enough to talk, when he would speak of himself as, "Poor little Dodge," until every one about the place began to call him Dodge also.

"I shall remember when the time comes, don't you worry," he replied with happy

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confidence ; then asked eagerly, " What do we call it to-night, Bertha : is it an ' at home ' or a ' deception ' ? "

" ' Reception ' you mean," cried Bertha, with a little stamp of her foot, meant to be impressive, and was about to give him a vigorous lesson in deportment, at the same time explaining her views with regard to the nature of the festivities, when in rushed the earl and countess, otherwise Tom and Ellie, a full half-hour before they were expected.

" Oh, you must not come yet ; we are not ready," shouted Bertha and Dodge in consternation.

" Never mind the party, that can wait," said Ellie, who was flushed with excitement and quite out of breath, having evidently been running at top speed.

" There's been a party of cattle-duffers raiding Mr. Knutsford's place, and Tim says they are coming here to-night," burst in Tom, who having got a little more breath than Ellie, blurted out the bad news with all possible speed.

Bertha turned as white as the newspaper-table-cloth, and let a pickle-bottle drop unheeded

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on the floor, where it broke into fragments at her feet.

"Cattle-duffers! Ch, what shall we do if they come here while father is away?" she cried in a panic-stricken tone.

"They are not likely to come here, for the police are after them; that black-fellow Tim has no more sense than a black cockatoo," said Ellie, vehemently.

"How did Tim know?" asked Bertha faintly, then turned to soothe Dodge, who had burst into noisy crying, and was roaring lustily with his mouth wide open. Mr. Knutsford's station, called the Shirley Run, was thirty miles away to the east, and in that sparsely settled district, where telegraph wires were few and far between, news did not travel very fast.

"Is there anything a black-fellow doesn't know?" asked Ellie with a laugh. "Tim says Lewis Daly told him that Shirley was raided two days ago, every head of cattle and all the horses being driven off. But the police are out searching for the thieves, so it was only imagination on Tim's part that they would come here to-night."

The Cattle-Duffer's Baby

"Let us go in and tell Joyce; this can wait," said Bertha, swinging her hand in the direction of the festive spread, then all four trooped off to the house to find Joyce, and tell her the bad news left by the black-fellow Tim.

The home of the Paynter children was a big rambling house of one story, with a thatched roof, surrounded by a verandah, and white-washed inside and out. It stood on a gentle rise with a background of jam-wood trees, so called because the logs from those trees, when freshly sawn, smelled strongly of raspberry jam. In front of the house a large garden sloped down the hill to a larger orchard, which in its turn sloped towards the valley, where a line of flooded gums showed the course of the river, when there happened to be one, which was not always.

Mrs. Paynter had just come in, and her horse was still tethered to the verandah rail, when the four children rushed into the kitchen where Joyce was busy with supper preparations.

Their mother was there also, looking grave and anxious but not panic-stricken, and the children pelted her with questions as to whether

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she had heard Tim's news about the cattle-duffers, as the stealers of cattle were called in that neighbourhood, and whether she was afraid their own cattle would be driven off that night, as the black-fellow had suggested.

"I have seen Lewis Daly, who has told me all he knows, and if the police are hot on the trail I don't fancy the thieves will have much time for fresh raiding," said Mrs. Paynter. "Still, we can never be quite sure, and as to be forewarned is to be forearmed, we can make everything as sure as possible before darkness comes. Stevie is helping the men at Bandicoot Gully to round up the colts, and he is going to stay there all night with Towler, so that Sparkin and Pearce can come down to the homestead to take their turn at sentinel duty to-night."

"Is it as bad as that, mother? I thought we were getting so civilized that all such troubles were passed," said Joyce, turning from the cooking-stove with an anxious face. She was slight and tall, with a great quantity of red-gold hair, which she wore coiled about her head. Her dark-blue cotton frock was simple to severity; and she had a gentle, refined manner that made

The Cattle-Duffer's Baly

her an ideal eldest sister to that big family of noisy boys and girls.

"It may not be bad at all, only it is wise to take precautions now your father is away," Mrs. Paynter said briskly, then went off again carrying a bag containing tea and sugar, which she meant to give to the blacks camping in the scrub, at the same time enlisting their help for the protection of her husband's cattle and horses.

The girls stayed indoors with [redacted], but Tom and Dodge went off back [redacted] shed, where they ate up all the nugget s [redacted] and as much of the fruit as they could manage; then feeling nervous they came creeping back to the kitchen, where the three sisters were hard at work getting the supper ready, and sitting in a corner told each other stories about cattle-thieving, real and invented, until bed-time. They had no appetite for supper, which troubled their mother a little, until she found out what they had been doing.

Late that night, when all the children had gone to bed, Mrs. Paynter and Joyce were in the sitting-room waiting for Sparkin to come in for some supper before going on sentinel duty,

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when they heard the sound of a hard-ridden horse approaching the house up the slope from the river-bed.

"Mother, who can that be ; some one with bad news ? " cried Joyce, starting with a white face.

"I don't know ; I am going to see," her mother said calmly, but picking up a loaded revolver that lay in readiness on a side table. In those wild parts women had to learn the art of defence as well as men, and Mrs. Paynter had long accustomed herself to the use of firearms.

But the man who rode up to the verandah on a horse all flecked and spotted with foam, had come on a peaceful errand enough, though he was heavily armed, as she could see in the light streaming from the open door behind her.

"Mrs. Paynter, will you take care of my baby for me ? I'm hard pushed, and the little chap isn't very well, or I wouldn't ask it," said the man, stooping lower in the saddle and speaking in a hurried manner as if in desperate haste.

"Who are you ? I seem to know your voice, but I cannot remember your face," she

The Cattle-Duffer's Baby

said, stepping closer to the side of the horse, all thought of fear or nervousness vanishing at the mention of a baby, and the sound of a fretful wail from the bundle, which the man carried in front of his saddle.

"Never mind who I am ; you will find out soon enough ; but say, madam, will you cherish for a few weeks or months a desolate infant that has lost its mother, and whose father is fleeing from justice, a desperate man, in fact ? " he spoke with an odd mixture of imploring and impatience in his tone, and with a quick leaping of her heart Mrs. Paynter instantly guessed that he was one of the band of cattle-duffers that had raided Shirley, and were being at this moment pursued by the police.

"Give me the child, and I will do my best for it ; I will treat it as if it were my own," she said, holding out her arms to take the baby, first laying her revolver down on the bench at her side. There was a touch of solemnity in her voice as she spoke, while her heart beat furiously, for she saw clearly enough that by caring for the infant she might be preserving her home and her children from disaster at the hands of the cattle-raiders.

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"May Heaven reward you for your goodness, madam. The child is named Jimmy, and I shall come for him again some day, if I live!" said the man in a choked voice; then carefully placing the wailing bundle in her arms, he rode away as he had come at top speed.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW INMATE

THE children's dreams that night were a wild chaos of interrupted feasts, robbery of cattle, much rushing to and fro of people, and the continual wailing of an infant.

Bertha, who was old enough to remember very clearly the earliest days and doings of Dodge, kept dreaming that he was a tiny babe again, and that she was rocking his cradle in a vain endeavour to get him to sleep; but presently, becoming wider awake, she opened her eyes to find the grey dawn stealing over the tops of the trees, and to hear the sweet clear song of the "break-o'-day-boy," which is a kind of magpie, as a rule the first of all the birds to celebrate the coming of dawn.

Then she heard a sound which at the first made her think she must be dreaming still, for it was the crying of a baby, and there had been

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no child younger than Dodge in the house when she went to bed last night.

Drawing a long breath and pinching herself vigorously to make sure that she was really awake, Bertha slipped out of bed quietly in order not to wake Ellie, and running along the passage to the door of her mother's room stood looking in, held for the moment spellbound with amazement.

A bath of steaming hot water stood in the middle of the room, and Joyce knelt beside it carefully testing the heat with her naked elbow through lack of a thermometer, and adding cold water, whilst her mother sat on a low chair close by, nursing a wailing bundle that was wrapped in a blanket.

"A real live baby ; oh, mother, where did you get it from ? Do let me look ! " Bertha pushed open the door as she spoke, and bounded across the floor to her mother's side, peering eagerly at the screwed-up face of the protesting infant.

" Poor little fellow, he is not well, that is why he cries so ; Joyce and I have been up with him all night, and now we are going to see if a hot bath will make him more comfortable," Mrs.

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Paynter said, drawing the folds of the blanket aside in order to lay the infant in the warm comfort of the prepared bath.

"Oh, mother, what a darling he is! May I put him into the water?" cried Bertha, holding out her arms to the baby. "Come to me you little lubba-lubba loo, lubba-lubba loo!"

To the surprise of Mrs. Paynter and Joyce, the infant at once ceased wailing, the puckered creases of its face smoothed into a happy smile, while from its rosy lips came an answering gurgle of "Lubba-lubba loo."

"He has had a black woman for a nurse!" exclaimed Joyce, with a sigh of relief at the cessation of the crying.

"Yes, I should think so, for it was Bertha's old black nurse who taught her that magic charm for crying children; just see how good he is now, Joyce, and think of all the trouble we have had through the night," said Mrs. Paynter. Bertha carefully deposited the baby in the bath, sponging him all over, getting her white night dress rather wet in the process, but caring not at all, while she chuckled and crowed, talking to the delighted baby in the only language he could understand, while he

The Black Cockatoo

gurgled, laughed, and cooed in a fashion that was quite irresistible.

Once out of the bath he fell asleep directly, having been safely tucked up in bed by Bertha, who afterwards ran off to make her own toilet, and spread the news of Jimmy's arrival among the other children.

The household was all astir by this time, and before the sun was an hour above the horizon, Stevie came riding down to the homestead on a big roan horse, anxious to know if the night had been free from disturbance.

"Why, how tired you look, Stevie; have you been up all night?" asked Joyce, who was getting breakfast, and looked as fresh as if she had had her proper allowance of sleep.

"I've taken my share of watching, and pretty anxious work we found it, expecting to see a fireglow on the night sky for all those hours," the boy said wearily, as he sat down on a bench by the table and commenced upon his breakfast without delay.

"What do you mean?" asked Joyce in surprise.

"After Sparkin and Pearce had come down to the homestead last night, Towler went off for

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a last round of the fold, and hearing a dingo bark came back by way of the upper soak. Then he found that it was a tame dingo that he had heard, belonging to a black-fellow named Booja and his gin,¹ who were camping out for the night by the soak."²

"Well?" queried Joyce impatiently, as her brother paused to take a long deep draught of tea.

"Booja told Towler that the cattle-duffers were fleeing before the police, and that they were firing every station they came to, and then he said that they were on the way to Wo-la."

"Poor Stevie! What a state of worry you must have been in about us all," said Joyce, in a pitying tone; "I wonder you did not start right away and ride home, though I am really glad you did not, seeing that we were undisturbed by alarms."

"I should have set off there and then, only Towler said it was very likely a put-up story of Booja's to get us out of the way so that he might help himself to a little mutton; and then I remembered what father said the Sunday before he went away, that our first duty was to do the

¹ Wife.

² A shallow hole for water.

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work appointed for us. But we took it in turn to watch all night with our ears on the sheep, and our eyes on the sky," said the boy with a shake of his head, as if even the memory of the night were a horror, to be forgotten as quickly as possible.

Just then Mrs. Paynter entered the kitchen ; she had ridden over to Tuckwell's Range directly the sun rose to see how it had fared with their nearest neighbours.

Tuckwell's Range was seven miles away, a store and a farm combined, kept by the two nephews of an old man named Martin Tuckwell, who having spent many years of his life wandering up and down the ranges hunting for gold without success, had finally settled down to trading, making money surely and steadily until he died, when his two nephews from Perth had come to carry on the store and the farm.

So far they had not managed to make a brilliant success of either, both of them being too fond of riding about all over the country to stick very closely to business. The elder belonged to the volunteer police force, and had ridden off early on the previous morning to lend his assistance in catching the gang of

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cattle-thieves who were raiding the countryside, leaving his younger brother Bert in sole charge of store and farm.

"Tuckwell's place was raided last night, and burned afterwards," Mrs. Paynter said, with a pant of hurry in her tones.

"Oh, mother, was any one hurt?" Joyce asked in dismay.

"There was no one on the place to be hurt, except Bert," said Mrs. Paynter, with a smile of amusement, "and he, deeming discretion the better part of valour, ran to cover in the scrub, so the cattle-duffers had no one to interrupt them in their operations."

"That Bert always was a bit of a coward," asserted Stevie, with a shrug of his shoulders as he made haste to finish his breakfast, "but the wonder to me is that the gang, when they had finished with Tuckwell's Range, didn't come on here."

"It was the baby that saved us, poor little Jimmy!" Mrs. Paynter said, a mist of tears coming up in her eyes. "If I had refused to take him, then our place would have been fired out of malice. As it is, our home is saved to us by the weak hands of a baby."

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"Not a bit of it," chimed in Joyce, in a funny choked voice, between a laugh and a cry, "our home was saved for us because our dear, darling mother has got a heart big enough to include even a cattle-duffer's baby; and by the way, I can hear that dear infant beginning to stir. I expect Dodge has been in to inspect the new wonder, and stirred him up in order to see him cry. Run, Bertha, and soothe him will you, dear; he ought to sleep for hours after his lively performances of last night."

Bertha, who had only just come into the kitchen, ran off in a great hurry, to find Dodge standing by the cradle and examining the new inmate, poking at the baby with a cautious finger, as if a little afraid lest it might turn and bite, while Jimmy, resenting this disrespectful treatment, was commencing a noisy and vigorous protest.

"Oh, Dodge, what a naughty, unkind trick to play a poor, sleeping baby; how would you like to be poked and pinched when you were asleep?"

"I didn't pinch him, Bertha, I only poked him to see what he would do. Oh, I say, can't he just yell!" and the small boy struck an

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attitude of intense admiration at poor Jimmy's vocal performances.

Bertha bundled him out of the room with more haste than ceremony, and lifting the wailing baby in her arms, walked up and down the room, patting and soothing him with quite motherly tenderness, until the baby was once more beguiled into sleeping.

She was putting him back in the cradle again—the cradle in which Dodge had slept when he was an infant—and was gently rocking him into deeper slumber, when a sudden commotion seemed to rise and spread through the house, which had been so quiet before. Then came a wail of weeping from Ellie, with another less noisy outcry from Tom.

Trembling all over, fearful of some disaster, Bertha hurried out to the kitchen, where as a rule detachments of the family took breakfast as most convenient to them, the meal spreading itself over one or two hours sometimes.

But when Bertha appeared on the threshold the breakfast-table was quite deserted, the family being gathered about Mrs. Paynter, who sat with a drawn, white face on a chair by the open door, and an open letter in her hand.

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"Mother, what is the matter?" cried Bertha, sharply, noticing even in that moment of keen anxiety that the envelope lying on the floor at her mother's feet had no stamp on it, so must have been brought by special messenger, and that the letter itself had a printed heading.

Mrs. Paynter did not speak, only stared in a dazed fashion at the letter in her hand, and it was Joyce who replied tearfully to Bertha's question.

"Father has had an accident; he has been kicked by a horse at Geraldton, the very day before he was to have started for home, and the hotel people have written for mother to go to him at once." Joyce broke down in a sob which was promptly echoed by Ellie and Tom.

Bertha shivered, but no tears came to relieve her smarting eyes, only she caught hold of the door-post to keep herself from falling, while she said the only thing that came into her head—

"But it is such a long way for mother to ride, nearly two hundred miles."

"Yes, it is a long way, but your father needs me, and I must go," said Mrs. Paynter, rousing herself by a great effort. "Girls, hurry and get

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some breakfast for Mr. Montcalm, then with fresh horses we might start in an hour."

"I can be ready in ten minutes if you wish," said an unfamiliar voice, and looking round Bertha saw a strange young man standing by the window.

CHAPTER III

DIVIDED RESPONSIBILITY

CHARLIE MONTCALM was a new chum from Tasmania, and had been knocking about in Geraldton looking for work, when the accident to Mr. Paynter made it necessary for some one to ride to Woolla, and summon Mrs. Paynter to her husband's side.

Having nothing else to do, Charlie was very glad to volunteer for the task, and although he knew nothing of the road, Mr. Paynter's horse knew its way home perfectly, and had done the distance in three days with comfort, in spite of the trail in places being heavy with sand.

Joyce and Bertha hurried to make fresh tea, and broil kangaroo steaks with bacon, so that the young man should have a comfortable meal, while Mrs. Paynter put together a few necessary things in a bag which could be strapped on the saddle.

Divided Responsibility

Stevie came in while the bustle of preparation was at its height, and hearing the news went off again in a great hurry, to bring up a dependable horse for his mother to ride. There was no stockman available for the task just then, or he would have stayed to talk to his mother about the work that must be done in her absence.

Meanwhile his mother was summoning to her help the best aid of all. In their busy and anxious life, there had been, she felt, too little remembrance of God. Now in the presence of this new anxiety she felt the weakness of earthly support. To whom could she look for safety for her husband, for security for her children, but to the Heavenly Father Who had sent "the Son to be the Saviour of the world," Whose love and concern therefore extended to herself? In that moment of grief the Gracious Spirit of God moved her to draw near in faith. With streaming eyes she poured out her brief supplications, and rose from her knees strengthened for her journey.

When Stevie came back with the horses, one for his mother and one for the strange young man, Mrs. Paynter was ready and waiting to

The Black Cockatoo

start; there was no time for directions concerning this and that, but just as she was going to mount her horse, the mother said to the children grouped about her—

“My dears, your father is in danger, and I am going to him. Remember your Heavenly Father. Ask Him to watch over father and mother and yourselves. As for things at home, I am just leaving you to do your best : you, Joyce, will be mistress indoors, and the young ones must obey you, because you stand in my place ; Stevie, I leave all the outdoor business to you, and you must just use your own judgment about things, and be sure I shall not blame you if you do make mistakes. I would have left clear directions for you if I could, but there is no time, for every minute is precious ”

“Don't worry about us, mother, we shall be sure to get on somehow,” Joyce said bravely, though there was a quiver in her voice, and it was all she could do to keep back her tears, for to her it was simply a dreadful thing to be left in charge of that big family in such a fashion.

“I shall not have time to even think much about you, I am afraid ; it is your father who needs me most now, and I must do my best for

Divided Responsibility

him," Mrs. Paynter said, as she settled herself in the saddle of the horse Stevie was holding.

"Oh, we'll do fine, I haven't a doubt; just you get father on his feet again," Stevie said, his voice no more steady than Joyce's had been, for to him it was dreadful to think of his father lying bruised and broken so far away in Gerald-town.

Mrs. Paynter nodded her head, but did not trust herself to speak, and jerking her reins as a signal that she was ready to start, rode away with Charlie Montcalm following in the rear.

No one had thought to say good-bye to him, so absorbed were they by their mother's hurried departure and the disaster which had overtaken their father. But he had felt so sorry for their trouble, that their forgetfulness to bid him farewell was easily overlooked.

The children stood watching until their mother had ridden out of sight. Mrs. Paynter was quite a noted horsewoman, even in that district, where almost every white woman could ride, and ride well, and she often said she felt more at home in the saddle than in an easy-chair; but that perhaps was because she had so

The Black Co-ataoo

little time for sitting in easy-chairs, in the ordinary course of things.

"Oh, Bertha, whatever shall we do with the baby? I declare I had forgotten all about him," cried Joyce, in a tone of dismay, as the horses passed out of sight, where the trail wound into the scrub, beyond the line of flooded gums.

"I will take care of him; I am sure I can do that quite well, and he seems to like me better than any one else," replied Bertha, with an inward glow of satisfaction because of Jimmy's preference.

"We shall have holiday from lessons, shan't we, Joyce, until mother comes back, so that we can help you do things?" queried Tom, anxiously. He just detested books, and would rather do anything than study.

"Yes, I can't teach and be house-mother too, and Bertha can't help me much, because she will have to take care of the baby, so Ellie will have to make herself useful, while you, Tom, can take care of Dodge and see that he does not get in too many pickles," Joyce answered, then turned back into the house, to face resolutely the heavy day of work that lay before her.

Divided Responsibility

Very simple ways of living were observed at Woolla, for it was quite impossible to get white servants so far up-country, while the black women had no idea of decent ways of doing things, and would not take the trouble to learn.

Stevie would have to ride far and wide to-day, doing his mother's work and his own too. Since the absence of Mr. Paynter, Mrs. Paynter had spent a large part of her time in overlooking the work on the station, and as she was fully as good a farmer as her husband, the work had gone on without any flagging.

That was how Stevie meant it should go on still, if by any means he could contrive to keep every one up to the pitch of doing his or her duty.

Woolla was a mixed farm, which meant that not only were great flocks of sheep pastured on the ranges, but land had been broken and fenced near the home station for the growing of corn, where already wide stretches of wheat, maize, and potatoes were giving a goodly promise of an abundant harvest to follow.

It was these fenced fields which made Stevie's greatest anxiety now that he was left in sole

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charge of affairs at Woolla, for although wild horses and wild cattle would do anything rather than face a fenced enclosure, through fear of a trap, the wild man had no such scruples, and was a constant annoyance, because of his thievish habit of stealing potatoes and corn.

Late in the afternoon of the day that Mrs. Paynter set off on her long ride to Geraldton, Stevie came riding back from a distant sheep camp, and struck the cultivated grounds on the side where they bordered the wilderness pure and simple. He had not been that way for four days, and he was not sure that his mother had either.

He was riding slowly along the boundary fence, his horse and himself being alike tired, when his attention was arrested by a thin column of smoke, rising from the edge of a dense growth of black wattle, while at the same time the yelping of a tame dingo betrayed the presence of a native camp.

"It is that wretched Booja, I expect," he muttered to himself in a wrathful fashion, remembering how last year that wily black man had come to camp on the edge of the potato ground, just when the tubers had been first

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ready for eating, and had stayed there until the last row had been ploughed up and carted away, with the result that many bushels of potatoes, which by rights should have gone into the storerooms of Woolla, had served instead to feed Booja and his family.

But if it were Booja who had come to squat by the potato field this year, he had come a good three weeks before any of the crop would be ready for eating, and he had also brought a number of his friends with him, for when Stevie, dismounting from his horse, crept cautiously through the wattle scrub, he saw on the edge of a little pool four miahhs, as the native huts are called.

These miahhs are made of a few wattle boughs tied together at the top, loosely thatched with dried grass and rushes, open in front, and covered over the sloping sides with loose earth and stones, which kept the untidy thatch in place.

There was a smouldering fire burning in front of each miah, on a heap of white ashes which served for a cooking-place. Further back, nearer to the doorless entrance of the hut, were planted several spears, and a good number of wommeras, or throwing-sticks.

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Some children were wrangling with the tame dingoes for possession of the bones of a small opossum, on which some fragments of flesh still lingered, while two or three men, the colour of an over-roasted coffee berry, lounged by the fire. But no women being visible, Stevie decided that they were still wandering abroad in search of food.

Then he backed through the thicket as silently as he had come, and mounting his horse again, rode on towards the home station.

It was very worrying to find such a big encampment of blacks in the near neighbourhood. Of course, they might be only passing on to somewhere else, but one could never be quite certain what these wild creatures would be doing next, and Stevie felt that in the enforced absence of his father and mother, he should have been much happier if this particular lot of black-fellows had chosen to encamp somewhere else.

Booja was not among the men sitting about the fires, so perhaps this party of blacks might have chanced on the camping-place haphazard, and without any eye to the potatoes. But if they stayed there they would most

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certainly discover that close to their doors, as it were, was a field full of roots uncommonly good to eat, and as the rights of property never in any way appealed to these wild men, it would plainly be very bad for the potatoes in such a case.

Stevie aired his grievances over the supper-table that evening, and received the sympathy of his sisters. But Sparkin, a dour sort of an Englishman, who had only escaped being a Scotsman through being born south of the Tweed, grunted a half-inaudible something about black-fellows being no better than dingoes, wallabies, and other sorts of vermin, then went out to smoke his pipe on the verandah and listen to the music of the bull-frogs droning their even-song among the yanjits or native bulrushes in the marshy pools of the valley, where the river current ran in flood time.

Pearce had gone back to Bandicoot Gully, where he shared with Towler the care of the sheep, and so the silent Sparkin was the only hired station hand at Woolla just then. Joyce was very thankful for this, for Sparkin was middle-aged, quiet, and with a most convenient way of effacing himself.

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It was while Joyce and Bertha were clearing the supper-table, and making the house tidy for the night, that Ellie, who was also supposed to be taking an active part in these clearing-up operations, heard an agitated whisper from Tom.

"Come out on the back verandah; I've got a lovely idea."

"I can't just now, because Joyce wants me; you go, and I will come in two or three minutes," whispered Ellie back, while a most delightful thrill pervaded her whole being. Tom's tone having such an air of mystery about it, that it seemed to promise something unusually good in the way of diversion.

Then at the first moment, when Bertha had gone to soothe Jimmy, who appeared to be having bad dreams, and while Joyce and Stevie were deep in discussion about affairs of home and station, Ellie left the supper dishes to take care of themselves for a time, while she crept out to confer with Tom in the shadow of the high banksia hedge, which was just then coming into flower.

It was past the hour when they usually went to bed, and Dodge was already fast asleep,

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but the hurried departure of Mrs. Paynter had naturally disorganized things a little. Joyce, too, was so busy listening to Stevie's account of how the volunteer police were chasing the cattle-duffers from one point to another, that she failed to notice Ellie's sudden defection from duty.

"What's the idea?" asked Ellie, abruptly sitting down beside her brother on the little old bench with the waggly leg that Stevie had made when he first came back from the school at Geraldton.

"Why I know a way to scare the black-fellows off the plantation altogether, only I shall want you to help, because one can't do it all alone," said Tom, in a more mysterious tone than before.

CHAPTER IV

TOM'S BRILLIANT IDEA

"WHAT do you want to drive the blacks away for? they don't do any harm," queried Ellie, in a momentary forgetfulness of Stevie's anxiety concerning the potatoes.

"Don't do any harm, indeed! That is all you know about it," snorted Tom, in disgust. "Why, father was saying only the day before he went away, that he expected that from first to last they stole between thirty and forty sheep every year; and although mutton may be cheap, one may have too much of that sort of thing," he went on in such a faithful imitation of Stevie, that Ellie broke into mocking laughter.

"What a little parrot you are, Tom; why can't you be content to be yourself, instead of aping Stevie?" she said impatiently.

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"If I'm a parrot you are very much like a screaming black cockatoo, making all that row!" he retorted, in no pleased tone, for like most other boys, big and little too, he hated to be made fun of.

"Well, tell me your idea as quickly as you can, or I shall have Joyce coming out to hurry me off to bed," Ellie said, with such an evident desire to be on good terms with him that Tom forgave her instantly, and at once plunged into eager talk about the plan he had made for freeing Woolla from its black visitors.

"You know," he said, with a pant of hurry in his voice, "the blacks are dreadfully afraid of Joonos."

"What are Joonos?" demanded Ellie, with very keen interest indeed.

"They are," and Tom spread out his hands looking round vaguely for something which would do for comparison, but failing entirely—"They are—well, just Joonos."

"Who told you about them?" asked Ellie, who did not feel much wiser.

"It was Booja, that time when I stayed for a week up at Bandicoot Gully with Towler. Booja used to show me how to light fires without

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matches, and to hunt frogs from their holes in the ground. He told me, too, that all blacks are dreadfully afraid to stir from their camp fires at night, for fear lest the Joonos should catch them."

"Are Joonos something like ghosts?" asked Ellie, eagerly, while she shivered between enjoyment and awe, remembering the weird but utterly delightful ghost stories which Stevie used to tell when he first came back from his two years' absence at school in Geraldton.

"Yes, something like that; only Booja said he had never seen one; indeed, nobody ever saw them, only heard them. If any one heard them once it was a warning to move on, because if they were heard twice it meant lingering death to the people who heard," Tom said, with another flourish of his hands.

"What kind of a noise was it?" demanded Ellie, breathlessly.

Booja did not know, but he said it was a sound that filled your ears so full that there was no room to think, no room to do anything but be frightened nearly out of your life. He said, too, that once, ever so many years ago, when his father was a little boy, a Joono lived

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in the water-hole down beyond the black-boy trees, and it used to make a noise whenever people or cattle came to drink."

"Then I suppose they all ran away frightened," said Ellie, with a little wriggle of utter enjoyment, for this story of native superstition was to her more interesting than any book she had ever heard of.

"No, they didn't," said Tom, with a serious air, "it was a dry time then, and if they dug a soak no water came; there was no well up here at the homestead either, because you see there wasn't a homestead at all, for no white people lived at Woolla then. So being pressed by thirst they took no notice of the warning, but came to drink again and again."

"Well?" demanded Ellie, more breathless than ever.

"Booja said the people and the wild cattle, the bandicoots, opossums, and all the other creatures that came to drink, died in scores and in hundreds," Tom answered in a solemn tone.

"I expect the water got poisoned somehow," said Ellie, shrewdly; "then all the creatures which drank died of the bad water. Don't

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you know what Mr. Sparkin told us once about the waterhole at Great Nibison, where he was nearly killed by drinking the poisoned water, and that the animals which drank died in all directions ? ”

“ It might have been the same, but that doesn't matter ; the thing of importance is that they know, or think they know, that a Joono used to be here on the Woolla Station, so they would be quite ready to believe any noise at night, which they could not understand, to be made by Joonos. So if you and I went over on the first dark night, and made a fearful row, they would clear out in no time at all, I expect ; then Stevie would have no more trouble about his potatoes,” here Tom paused, being quite out of breath, to see what effect his speech had made upon Ellie.

Instead of the delight he had expected, however, she only stared at him in a frightened fashion, while she said with a shudder—

“ Oh, I should be horribly afraid to go out at night to scare the blacks away ; I am quite sure I could not do it.”

“ What silly sheep girls are ! ” exclaimed Tom, flinging up his hands with a gesture of

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disgust. "Can't stir ten yards away from home when it is dark, for fear lest you should meet a bogey-man. Why I would walk from here to Bandicoot Gully, and never fear in the least. Bah! I really haven't common patience with girls!"

"Ellie and Tom, come in to bed, children; why are you staying out so late?" called the voice of Joyce from the back verandah.

Ellie ran off in a great hurry, secretly thankful for the interruption. She was a nervous child, and the mere suggestion of roaming about at night made her shiver. But, on the other hand, she could not bear to seem inferior to Tom, who was two years younger than herself, and she simply writhed under the sting of his scorn.

"You should not stay out so late, dears; mother would not like it," Joyce said, with gentle reproof in her tone.

Ellie did not reply beyond an inaudible murmur, then slipped away to bed, feeling very sad and melancholy; she meant to cry herself to sleep, only forgot all about it, dropping into sound slumber directly her head touched the pillow.

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The three girls shared one room, Joyce usually occupying the bed in the corner, whilst Bertha and Ellie slept together, but in the absence of their father, Joyce had shared her mother's room, and now that Mrs. Paynter also was away, Joyce came back to share the room of her sisters, only she slept with Ellie, so that Bertha might have Jimmy's cradle propped up beside the little bed.

Joyce found it nervous work getting to sleep that first night of her mother's absence. The three boys were snoring comfortably in the room across the passage, six or seven dogs were taking their rest on the verandah outside the window, and Sparkin had his quarters in the little hut beyond the cook-house. In spite of this, however, the place seemed terribly lonesome to her, and she was wondering how she should possibly endure it through the long weeks stretching before her, when she drifted quietly into the sleep she needed so badly, and forgot all about it.

It was towards morning when Ellie began to dream. It might have been the shriek of a bittern that disturbed her, or the first rippling notes of an unusually alert break-o'-day-

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boy, anxious to salute the coming of the sunrise.

At first her dreaming was a confused vision of a wide black field, with herself and Tom running across it, only instead of being frightened she found herself enjoying the run with keen pleasure. Then the scene changed, and instead of running across the big field in the darkness, she was crouching with Tom in the long grass near a lot of trees, while in the distance she could see the red gleam of a fire. A long time they waited there, while delightful thrills went all over her, then suddenly she and Tom rushed out blowing trumpets and shrieking wildly. She seemed to see a long line of black figures in full flight, then was herself firmly caught and tightly held.

"Ellie, Ellie, what is the matter with you?" said the voice of Joyce, in alarmed accents in her ear; then came a whimpering cry from the cattle-duffer's baby, and Bertha's voice crooning a soothing kind of lullaby, while Ellie struggled into wakefulness, wondering what all the fuss was about.

"What are you doing?" she demanded sleepily, opening her eyes to find the little

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night-lamp still burning, and her sisters both on the alert, Bertha bending over the wailing baby, whilst Joyce was gripping her and shaking her into wakefulness.

"We want to know what you are doing, screaming and crying in this fashion? I woke up thinking that something dreadful was happening to you. Were you having bad dreams, dear?" and the tones of Joyce grew suddenly motherly and tender, as she remembered that she had to take care of all the children now that her mother was so far away.

"No, they were nice dreams; and, oh dear, I am so sorry that you woke me up," cried Ellie, resentfully.

"I think you might at least be sorry for having waked us up by shrieking in that fearful manner," said Bertha, severely, while Joyce sprang out of bed and went to the door to reassure Stevie, who had come to know what all the disturbance was about.

"Did I make a noise? Well, I am very sorry, truly I am, but I don't think I could possibly have screamed louder than Jimmy is yelling now. Can't you turn him face downwards, Bertha, it would not sound so bad?"

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Ellie said impatiently, anxious to drift into slumber and dreamland again without further delay, so delightful had been her recent experience.

"Poor baby! You frightened him so badly that he can't get over it," Bertha said, taking Jimmy out of his cradle and tucking him down in her arms in order to soothe him.

His crying became fainter then, and presently he grew drowsy, dropping to sleep again just when sunrise coming made it necessary for the three girls to get up to face the work of another day.

"You and Joyce can sleep in mother's room to-night, then Jimmy and I can be sure of a little peace," grumbled Bertha, who was tired and sleepy, as she dressed rapidly in the cool bright morning. The window was wide open and already there was the stir and commotion outside of a new day beginning. Dogs were barking, cocks crowing, and horses whinnying, as they were rounded up in the home paddock in readiness for the work of the day.

"So we will; a very good idea, Bertha; we shall find it cooler to be spread about more

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as the nights grow hotter," said Joyce; but Ellie gave a sudden start as she reflected how easy it would be for her to slip away with Tom in such a case, to try their skill in scaring the black-fellows from Woolla before the potatoes were fit to eat.

She was very anxious to make her peace with Tom, now that her dream had taken away for the time her fear of the dark, because she wanted to tell him that on second thoughts she was quite prepared to share in his scheme.

But Tom kept carefully out of her way all day. In the morning he and Dodge went off with Sparkin to help mend the cattle trap four miles away down the river. Even small boys can be very useful in wild places, where workmen are so hard to procure, and the young Paynters had all learned to take their part in the labour of the station whenever need was pressing.

They would not be back until supper time, Ellie knew very well, so for all that long bright day she had to nurse her impatience as best she could, while she helped Joyce to make a batch of bread and to cook the ducks which Stevie had shot on the previous evening.

CHAPTER V

THE MOONLESS NIGHT

IT was a whole week to wait before the nights were moonless enough for Tom to put his experiment to the test.

He knew very well that it was only on dark nights that the black-fellows, so full of valour and warlike daring by day, were afraid to stir from the fancied security of their smouldering camp fires. On moonlight nights they wandered where they would, hunting for food among the wild things of the scrub and the ranges, or pillaging from the white man.

Many were the consultations he held with Ellie during those days of waiting as to the most awe-inspiring noise that it was in their power to produce. At first Ellie was anxious to try the effect of their own voices in weird screams and howls, helped out and made more horrible by hollow tubes of dried yanjits or

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bulrushes, such as the children always used when they wanted impromptu trumpets.

Tom pointed out shrewdly enough that yanjit stalks and their own vocal efforts would not do at all, since it was the blacks who had first taught them the use of these natural trumpets, while no white boy or girl could ever hope to compare with, much less excel, a black man in the art of yelling.

"We must have some noise that is strange to them," he said, screwing up his eyes and thinking very hard. The two had run away for that afternoon, and had taken refuge in a deep gully or valley, in which was situated the Black Boy Water-hole, a deep sombre pool so named, not from any reference to natives, but because of the trees surrounding it, which, though possessed of a Greek name eleven letters long,¹ were locally always known as "Black Boys."

These trees had smooth black stems without any bark, and at the top of the trunk a great mat of stuff like long grass hung down.

Tom and Ellie had been forced to run away that day to get out of the way of Dodge, who,

¹ Xanthorrhoea.

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scenting a mystery, had suddenly become very fond of their society, and was determined to find out what it was all about if he could.

Only yesterday, when they were having a long confab under the acacia tree at the side of the house, a sudden slip and rustle in the boughs above them made Ellie look up to find Dodge perched in the fork of a branch, and listening with all his might.

After that the two decided that all future talks on the great subject must be carried on where there was no danger of listeners, so stealing away while Dodge was busy dragging Jimmy up and down the garden path in a little box on wheels, the only sort of perambulator the Paynter children had ever known, they had raced through the cultivated grounds until the water-hole was reached.

"I know!" exclaimed Ellie, triumphantly. "Mr. Sparkin has got a violin in his clothes box; I saw it one day when Dodge and I went into his room to look at his books and things. The box was unlocked that day, but if it wasn't I know where he keeps the key."

"But we don't know how to play violins," objected Tom.

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"As if that mattered!" snorted Ellie, disdainfully; "I can make the thing shriek and howl—I did the day we found it, only Dodge was so frightened at the noise that he began to cry, so I had to leave off in a hurry."

"That is what you would have had to do if old Sparkin had caught you meddling with his things, I guess," Tom said, with a laugh, as he prodded unconcernedly at a lump in the grass with a sharp-pointed stick which he carried. "What do you expect he will say to your stealing his violin?"

"It won't be stealing," she said indignantly; "I am only going to borrow it for a few hours. He won't know anything about it, I expect, for I can take it out of the box one day, and put it back the next."

"Very well, that is settled then, and if you only make row enough, the violin ought to about scare the black-fellows into fits."

"But what will you have? One thing won't be enough," Ellie wrinkled her brows as if in hard thought.

"There's that old French horn of father's, and the policeman's rattle that Stevie brought me when he came home from school; I could

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wing the rattle and blow the horn at the same time; that ought to be as much noise as one ordinary Joono could make on its own account," Tom said reflectively; then suddenly sprang up with an ear-piercing yell, beginning to dance and caper as if he were skipping on a hot plate.

"What is the matter?" demanded Ellie, in surprise.

"Ants!" he yelled, hopping about more wildly than before. "That lump in the ground is a nest, and I didn't notice, but poked my stick right into it. Look out, they are almost at your feet now."

From the hole in the ground made by the idle thrusting of his sharp-pointed stick, myriads of ants as long and nearly as big as the ordinary house-fly were pouring forth, intent on punishing the destroyers of their fortress walls.

A number of these angry ants had reached Tom's boots before he noticed them, and swarming up commenced operations by biting through his socks.

Ellie sprang up and fled to a safer place, but she also did not come off scathless, some of the advance guard of the red ants having

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already reached the heels of her shoes, and running up these unobserved, found the vulnerable part of her ankles, causing her no little pain and discomfort.

However, dwellers in the back country are used to all this sort of thing, so Ellie and Tom, having got rid of their tormenters, and found a less exciting neighbourhood to do their talking in, settled finally that the attempt to scare the blacks away must be made that very night; then when they had arranged everything to their own satisfaction, they went home as demurely as if no great event were just before them.

Doc'ge was still in charge of Jimmy, for Joyce and Bertha having an extra busy time in the house, were very thankful to have the baby taken off their hands for awhile.

"Where have you two been?" the small boy asked, in a discontented tone, as Ellie dexterously swarmed up the high garden fence, then dropped easily to the ground on the inner side.

"Oh, we've been a walk down by Black Boy Water-hole," she answered, with a shrug of her shoulders; "but I shan't go there again,

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for the place just swarms with red ants. To make things worse Tom poked a hole in a nest without noticing what he was doing, and then—well, we just had to run for it, I can tell you. I sat down to take off my shoes and stockings to get the creatures out, but Tom has them nearly all over him, and has gone indoors to undress and shake them from his clothes.”

“It serves him right, if he doesn’t know better than poke open ants’ nests,” remarked Dodge, in a superior sort of tone; then he descended to coaxing. “Take care of Jimmy for a few minutes, Ellie, like a good girl, then I will go and help Tom get rid of the ants, for if he leaves only one he will soon know it, and have to do his undressing all over again.”

“I can’t,” she answered quickly. “I promised Joyce that I would go indoors to help get supper at about four o’clock, and it must be nearly that now, by the look of the sun.”

“It is real horrid having to loaf round with a baby like this, when I wanted to take the dogs to see if we couldn’t find a bandicoot in

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the wattle scrub," grumbled Dodge, who had no liking for the task of nursemaid, even though Jimmy was this afternoon as good as a child could possibly be, chuckling and crowing with good humour and good health, as he sat propped up in the home-made carriage, and gripping a smooth stick with both chubby hands.

"Tom said as soon as he had settled with the ants, he would help you take Jimmy to fetch home the geese," Ellie said, stooping to pull up a big weed that was flaunting its head between the trim rows of garden stuff.

"Will he?" cried Dodge, with delight. "Oh, that is jolly, and Jimmy will like it; he always likes to see the geese. I say, isn't he a nice little fellow, Ellie, even though he is only a cattle-duffer's baby!"

"Oh, he is well enough; but it is rather a nuisance, having other people's children thrust on one in such a fashion; of course, we should not have had so much work to do if it had not been for Jimmy," she answered, in a grudging tone, as she stooped for another weed.

"Goo, goo, goo—o—o," gurgled the baby, with a flourish of the stick which made him

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hit himself on the nose, changing at once the contented cooing into cries of fright and pain.

They had only just succeeded in restoring him to smiling content once more, when Tom came walking along the sandy path of the garden, his air so full of mystery that Ellie longed to shake him, because he carried their secret writ so large on his face.

"All right, I'm ready; shall we go now?" he said, in an absent-minded fashion, with a nod to Ellie, which she only answered by a frown.

"You two are going to do something, and you don't want me to know!" Dodge exclaimed, with a quick suspicion, looking from one to the other.

Tom turned as red as the scarlet plumes of the callistemon trees, which bordered the garden fence; but Ellie only laughed in a jerky fashion, as she replied—

"We are going to do something, of course. I am going in to help Joyce and Bertha, while Tom goes for the geese; but we don't mind you knowing, or he would not have asked you to go too."

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Dodge shook his head with a baffled air, and for a moment was inclined to turn sulky and refuse to go. But it was rather slow out in the garden with only Jimmy to talk to while there was always fun in rounding up the geese with the help of the dogs, and there was a spice of danger in it, too, when the big old grey gander, the grandfather of the flock, turned to nip at legs which were only covered with stockings.

Ellie watched the two start in quest of the geese, dragging Jimmy's cart and whistling for the dogs as they went. Then she turned away, and went quickly off, not into the house, but slipping through the bushes past the sweet-smelling boronia, she sped swiftly along the fence, until she reached the little hut called the spare bedroom, where the station-hand named Sparkin slept.

Carefully looking round to see that no one was about, she darted into the stuffy but severely clean little room, which was only furnished with a bed, a bench, a table, some books on a shelf, and a box for clothes.

Opening this last, she dived down to the bottom, drew out a shabby old violin-case, and

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from it took the violin. She restored the case to its place under Mr. Sparkin's Sunday-best garments, then closing the box, darted away as lightly and as secretly as she had come, to hide the abstracted fiddle in the place agreed upon by herself and Tom.

The household retired to rest as usual that night, most of them falling asleep very quickly after the long day of activity in the sunshine.

Stevie was soon snoring placidly, while Dodge, who slept on a little bed near the window, looked like a cherub who had strayed down to earth for awhile. Then Tom, who had seemed to go to sleep sooner than either of the others, jerked up his head and looked cautiously around.

A moment's careful listening, then feeling sure the other two were fairly asleep he crept out of bed, seized his clothes, and walking on the tips of his toes, made the best of his way to the door, which stood slightly open.

Almost at the same moment, Ellie, also gripping a bundle of clothes, appeared at the door of her mother's room, where she now slept with Joyce, and creeping softly along the

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corridor to the big kitchen, which was also the family dining-room, they dressed with more haste than carefulness in the dense darkness, shuddering a little when an extra big cockroach crawled over their feet, but in no wise daunted as yet by the prospect before them.

CHAPTER VI

THE JOONOS

THE night was very dark, warm, and still. Ellie shivered a little as she crept out of the back door after Tom, who shut it softly, but it was excitement not cold which made her quiver and shake.

The door was barely shut, when there came a patter of quick feet round the corner of the verandah, and a curious sheep-dog arrived on the scene, anxious to learn what all the stir was about.

"Be quiet, Bruno, old fellow, be quiet!" urged Tom, putting his arm round the dog's neck and nearly choking the creature through fear, lest it should bark and rouse the people inside the house.

But Bruno had done a hard day's work, helping Sparkin to draw off various lots of sheep from the main flock, and being thoroughly tired,

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merely responded to Tom's bear-like hug by licking his face, then trotted off round the corner again to make sure of as much sleep as possible.

"That is right, if Bruno doesn't want to follow us, the other dogs won't trouble about it, and I took care to shut the puppies up in the store before I went to bed, just hear them whine!" said Tom, in a chuckling whisper, as hand in hand the two pushed through the banksia hedge, crept close past Sparkin's hut, then proceeded to skirt the garden fence in order to reach the open paddock, through which the cart track led to the cultivated grounds, that lay to the north of the homestead.

"I suppose it is best not to let the dogs come, and yet old Bruno, or Bouncer, or even the puppies would have been very nice company in the dark," Ellie remarked, suppressing a shiver with some difficulty, for the paddock looked so weird and lonesome in the gloom of the night. She kept a tight hold of Tom's hand, yet felt that after all he was only a boy younger than herself, and consequently not very much protection.

"A dog would have given the show away

The Joonos

directly by howling when the row began, you know what dogs are ; but come along, we've got to get the instruments," and twisting sharply round away from the beaten cart track Tom made his way to a big hollow tree growing with several others a few yards away from the fence of the garden.

"Mind there are no snakes," said Ellie, as Tom stooped in front of the hollow place in the trunk of the tree.

"Trust me, I don't mean to put my arm in, without seeing what it is I am going to take hold of," he rejoined, with quite a superior air, as he drew a box of matches from his pocket and proceeded to strike one.

Now the Paynter children were all strictly forbidden ever to touch matches, for in that land of rank vegetation and long droughts, a lighted match dropped carelessly might spell disaster and utter ruin, for grass fires, and bush fires would travel many miles, spreading to cultivated lands, licking up orchards, barns, and homesteads, carrying destruction on their fiery breath.

"Oh, Tom, how dared you take those matches, what would Joyce say to you ? " cried Ellie, in a shocked tone, as holding the match shaded

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with his hand, Tom peered into the hollow tree.

"What would Joyce say to me if I got snake-bite and died of it?" retorted Tom. "I knew I should need matches, and so I brought them. If we succeed in scaring the blacks away, I guess that Joyce, and Stevie too, will be much too grateful to think of scolding either of us."

"I'm sure I hope they will, but you can't be certain, for people don't always take things the way that you want them to," Ellie said, with visions of punishment looming large before her eyes as the result of this tremendous and dreadful enterprise on which they were embarked. She was secretly troubled, too, by thoughts of what her mother might say about the abstraction of Mr. Sparkin's violin.

"Here's the fiddle, hold it tight," said Tom, breathing hard from the exertion of stooping, as he drew the violin from its hiding-place in the hollow trunk, and put it into Ellie's hands.

Several matches had to be struck and were dropped before the French horn and the policeman's rattle were also extracted from the same place, then making sure that every match fragment was well extinguished, the adventurous

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pair set off at a good pace for the cultivated lands.

They had often walked in the same direction, but never before had they found the way so long. The clumps of trees standing black against the sky had a strange forbidding look, whilst the stunted bushes growing here and there had a hideous resemblance to a crouching black-fellow, or so Ellie thought as she hurried along by the side of Tom, reflecting dismally upon how different the real thing was to the easy pleasure of her dream.

"What is that?" she asked nervously, as they pushed through the fence of the cultivated lands, then cautiously made their way along the narrow track, between a promising patch of wheat on the one side and the potato ground on the other.

"Only a dingo, a wild one, too, now just hear the tame dingoes raging back at it," said Tom, as from far away came the sound of a long-drawn mournful howl, followed by a clamorous yelping and howling quite close at hand.

"Oh, I wish we were safe at home," panted Ellie.

"What a stupid little thing you are!" said

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Tom, in a tone of the most aggravating superiority. "Just look at all these potatoes, and think what it will be for father to lose as many as he did last year. When children have got good parents as we have, they ought to do what they can towards saving things, and keeping down expenses."

The principle of this was so proper and good, that Ellie hadn't the heart to protest any further, but very active doubts as to whether they were really doing right stirred in her mind as she crept after Tom along the narrow track between the wheat and the potatoes.

The dingoes, wild and tame, had dropped into quiet again, and instead there was the mournful croaking of the bull-frogs in the swamp, and the crying of the mophawk away in the wattle thickets.

Then came a rustling of feathers in the darkness overhead, which made Ellie start and shiver, while the perspiration gathered on her brow and rolled like tears down her cheeks.

"What is it?" she whispered to Tom, as the sound died slowly away.

"Only a flock of cranes or wild geese flying to fresh feeding grounds. Keep as quiet as

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you can now, for we are nearly there," he whispered back, and then they stole onward again, keeping their figures bent so that they might have been nothing but two little black shadows, stealing along by the side of the tall growing wheat.

Crickets and cicadas were whistling away in the darkness, as if trying to outdo each other, and Ellie was quite amazed to find what a lot of creatures were awake and on the alert, whilst she herself should, in the proper order of things, have been fast asleep.

But plainly the crickets, the night birds, and the dingoes were not afraid to be stirring and active in the dark, so they were not to be pitied, it was herself toiling over that great field in the darkness, and feeling so horribly nervous, who needed sympathy. A dozen times she wished herself a boy, because Tom, who stalked cautiously in the front, appeared to be troubled with no fears of any kind, and yet he was younger than she!

Once or twice Tom stopped to listen, then went forward again, never once speaking to the poor little girl, who trod quaking and shivering in the rear. But he guessed she was just

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aching to turn round and run away, so carefully refrained from giving her the necessary opening for retreat.

The cultivated grounds were surrounded by high wooden fencing, and beyond them on the side farthest from the station the ground was broken and rocky, with deep gullies, high hills, dense thickets of wattle and stringybarks, and the bigger jam-trees, which smelled so nice, and were so useful for fencing and firewood.

There were swamps, too, in this broken ground which rarely grew quite dry even in the long droughts, so there was a great deal of wild life to be found in that district, from the big droves of prancing, galloping wild horses, down to the small but valuable opossum.

Presently, after what seemed to Ellie like hours of walking, they reached the boundary fence, and climbing over it with some difficulty and much damage to their clothes, because of the barbed wire with which its defences were strengthened, they stood on the edge of the wild lands, and about ten minutes' walk from the camp of the black-fellows.

"Come along, and don't breathe a sound!"

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whispered Tom, clutching her arm and giving her a smart shake by way of imparting fresh courage, but which seemed to have the exactly opposite effect of robbing her of what little she had left.

However, to Ellie what lay behind in the way of darkness and solitude, seemed very much worse than going forward with Tom to frighten the sleeping blacks. At the worst, if they were discovered the natives would not harm them, at least she did not suppose they would, and people of any sort would be better than the wide lonely darkness all around.

Tom had carefully been over the ground on the previous day, and had discovered a comfortable rocky ledge upon which they could perch in safety, and from which a rapid retreat might be made to the comparative safety of the cultivated grounds, should it seem necessary.

Ellie had two tumbles, and more scratches than she could count, before this place was reached, and when at length she and Tom had scrambled to the top, she was very nearly bursting into tears from fright and weariness, being only deterred by fear of Tom's scoffing laughter,

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and unkind comments on the foolishness of girls in general, and of herself in particular.

"Now then, are you ready?" he asked, in a thrilling whisper, as after a brief rest he rose to his feet, standing outlined against the soft dark blue of the night sky. He made a queer little figure, armed with the French horn held ready to his mouth in the left hand, while with the right he held the policeman's rattle.

Ellie rose to her feet also, tucked the violin into the hollow of her shoulder with quite a professional air, then holding the bow as she had seen people do it in pictures, waited Tom's word of command to make the night hideous with wails and shrieks of fiddle strings.

It was just then that the utter absurdity of the position struck her, and she began to laugh in a nervous hysterical fashion at the figures of fun they must appear, perched high on that rocky ledge, about to commence a performance which must far surpass even their favourite game of Dutch Chorus for noise and discord.

"Now then, you start, and I will answer you then we'll fall in together, after that first one then the other, and don't you stop until I tell

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you," said Tom, with the air of a general leading his forces into battle.

A quavering shriek from the violin answered him, then a long-drawn mournful wail, that must have made all the dingoes within hearing distance wild with jealousy, then suddenly the clattering racket of the rattle burst out, with a triumphant tooting of the French horn, then the discordant shrieks of the tortured fiddle rang out on the quiet night, scaring every wild thing within a mile radius of the two intrepid performers on the rocky ledge.

Ellie had forgotten her fears, and was fiddling away in downright enjoyment of the fearful row she was making, when an imperative gesture from Tom made her stop suddenly.

"Listen!" he whispered, with a gurgle of delighted laughter.

Down by the wattles where the natives had their camp a wild commotion was taking place, shrieks, cries, much barking of dogs, came to the ears of the two, who, feeling that their work was done, gripped each other's hands, scrambled down the steep side of the ledge, and then rushed away towards home.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEXT MORNING

JOYCE had got over the first nervousness which had troubled her because of her mother's absence, while her hard work of every day made her so tired that when she went to bed she fell asleep, not waking until dawn roused her again to another round of duty.

But on the morning after that weird performance down on the edge of the cultivated grounds, she was aroused from slumber by hearing Stevie calling for Tom.

"What is the matter?" she asked, wondering if it were the middle of the night or nearly morning, for her room was still in comparative darkness.

"Tom has gone somewhere and taken my matches, or, at least, I can't find them. It is raining fast and I must go to help Sparkin move the lambs from the lower paddock, for if the

The Next Morning

river should come down in a freshet there may be a flood there before two hours are over," Stevie replied, in a rather irritable tone.

"It is morning then?" cried Joyce, struggling up in bed, trying to get wide-awake, and only half understanding even now what her brother was talking about.

"It will be daylight in half an hour. Can you lend me a box of matches? I want to find an oilskin from somewhere, or I shall be wet through in about one minute and a half," replied Stevie, who was apparently standing just outside the bedroom door, and drumming on it with impatient fingers, in order to hurry her movements.

Joyce struck a light in a great hurry, then having induced her lamp to burn properly, went to the door and gave the matches to her brother.

"Where is Tom?" she asked, in a worried tone, shivering in spite of the heavy cloak she had flung around her on getting out of bed.

"I don't know. Sparkin came to my window five minutes ago, woke me up, told me it was raining and that the sheep must be seen to, then went off to bring up the horses. But when I

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went to get a light I found my matches gone, and Tom missing, too. I shall give him a piece of my mind, when I come back to breakfast. Father just hates for the young ones to touch the matches, though in a rain like this it won't matter so much, of course, only it's a nuisance," grumbled Stevie, as he fumbled his way back to his bedroom, lighted his lamp, and proceeded to search for the required oilskin.

Joyce followed him, holding her cloak tightly round her to keep down that miserable shivering, her bare feet pattering noiselessly on the floor.

"But, Stevie, where could Tom possibly have gone to in the night like this?" she cried, with a quavering sob, as she turned back the clothes of the bed to assure herself that the mischievous Tom was not lurking under the blankets.

"I can't even imagine, he was there right enough, and fast asleep, too, when I came to bed," answered Stevie, which showed at least that Master Tom had shammed slumber pretty effectually.

"Perhaps Dodge knows," said Joyce, stepping over to the little bed by the window where her youngest brother still slept profoundly.

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"Dodge, Dodgie dear, wake up, there's a good little laddie, I want to talk to you," she said, in a coaxing tone, putting her head down on the pillow beside him, and stroking his face with caressing fingers.

But Dodge was at all times difficult to arouse from slumber until he had had his sleep out, and although he returned vague incoherent answers to his sister's coaxing queries, he did not really wake until, in desperation, she lifted him out of his bed and sponged his face with cold water.

"What is all the fuss about?" he said presently, with a disgusted wriggle as a fresh spongeful of water came flap on to his face.

"Do you know where Tom has gone?" Joyce asked again, forcing down the anxiety in her tone because she would not frighten him.

"I don't know nothing," responded Dodge, languidly turning his face away to avoid any more cold water, and cuddling closer in his sister's arms in order to resume his slumbers.

"I don't fancy you'll get much out of him, he is not half awake even now; put him back in his bed and let him have his sleep out. Tom

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will turn up all right at breakfast, don't you fear, and then we will tell him what we think about this kind of thing," said Stevie, as he went out of the room.

But Joyce was nervous about Tom still, and finding cold water had so little effect in rousing Dodge, set him on his feet with a brisk shake, saying sharply—

"Do try to wake up, Dodge, and tell us where Tom has gone, and why he went."

"I don't know," the small boy answered, swaying on such unsteady feet that Joyce had to stretch out a hand to keep him from falling. "Tom and Ellie were planning to go somewhere, only they wouldn't tell me about it; and when I tried to find out, they ran away and talked somewhere else."

With a sudden jerk, Joyce tilted the little boy back on to his bed, and darted back to her own room, where the lamp was still burning.

Dodge had said that Ellie knew, and Ellie was sleeping with her, but how strange that she had not roused when Stevie drummed so hard on the door!

Then a sharp cry burst from her as she reached the side of the bed from which she had

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risen, for the little sister who had seemed to be sleeping so peacefully when she herself had fallen into slumber, was no longer there.

Picking up the lamp she ran into the room Bertha shared with the cattle-duffer's baby.

"Bertha, Bertha, do you know where Ellie is?" she cried, in an agitated fashion, for this new discovery of Ellie's absence was such a disaster that she had simply forgotten Tom had disappeared also.

"No; how should I know where she is when she went to bed in your room? Oh dear, is it morning already?" cried Bertha, in a regretful tone, she was growing very fast, and was not very strong, so the nights seemed all too short for the amount of sleeping she had to get through in the time.

But instead of staying to reply Joyce darted out of the room along the passage into the kitchen, and across it to the back door by which Stevie had left the house.

She could hear voices talking, the clatter of horses' feet, and the agitated joyful barking of Bruno and the puppies; so flinging open the door she cried out—

"Stevie, Stevie, come back, I want you,

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Ellie has gone as well as Tom, so you must go to find them, and the sheep must wait."

There came no answer to her crying, the dogs were making such a clamour about the heels of the horses that neither Stevie nor Sparkin heard her shout, but putting their horses to a canter rode briskly away from the homestead, while the rain came down at a pour, and the grey dawn broadened into cold watery daylight, so depressingly different from the mornings when the sun came out and warmed the world with its rosy splendour.

Joyce started to run after them, but stepping into a puddle remembered that she was barefoot and clad only in her nightdress with a cloak flung on over it.

But the children must be searched for. Turning back into the kitchen she set her lamp on the table, extinguishing it now that the coming of daylight rendered it useless, and going to her room began to dress with feverish haste.

Bertha came to her there, having partly dressed while Joyce ran after Stevie.

"What is it all about, Joyce? I was so sleepy that I only half understood," Bertha said, yawning widely and looking so tired still

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that Joyce would have sent her back to bed for another hour's sleep but for this new trouble.

"Ellie and Tom are both missing; the naughty children must have stolen away while we were sleeping, though where they have gone, and why, is more than I can imagine. If only mother were at home what a comfort it would be, and, oh dear, what a worry children are!" sighed Joyce, in distressful tones.

"I shouldn't worry, they will turn up at breakfast-time all right, and safe enough, you will see," Bertha replied in a consoling fashion. She had been in so many pranks herself that it was more sympathy for the mischief than fear for its consequences that moved her now.

"But think of Ellie out in all this rain, and remember how easily she catches cold," said Joyce, with a swing of her hand towards the window as she hastily buttoned her blouse.

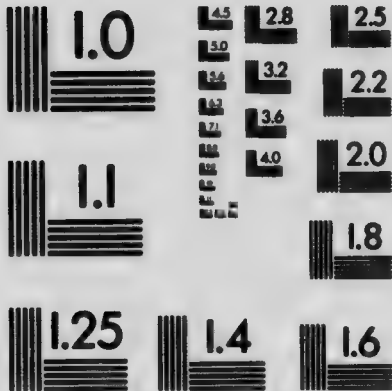
"Perhaps she isn't out in it. The pair of them may be hiding in some of the outhouses on purpose to give us a good scare, and to make Dodge jealous," suggested Bertha, who after all understood more of the minds of the missing pair than did her elder sister.

"I can make allowances for daytime pranks



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but I think they should have remembered their promise to mother that they would be good and do what they could to help," Joyce said with considerable severity in her tone. Then, her toilet being finished, she went out to the cook-house to rouse up the fire and prepare breakfast for Stevie and Sparkin, when they came back wet through from moving the sheep from the riverside pasture to the higher grounds, where there was no danger of drowning if the river came down in flood.

The cook-house was a substantial building, roofed with corrugated iron to lessen the danger of fire, and it was connected with the main house by an open-sided passage, also roofed with corrugated iron, on which this morning the rain was falling with a rhythmical noise that filled the ear to the exclusion of all other sounds.

Joyce went to and fro between cook-house and kitchen, her hands busy with the needs of the household, her thoughts all the time absorbed by the problem of the children's disappearance.

Presently Dodge came out, wearing a slightly crestfallen air, owing to an encounter with Bertha, who had insisted upon washing his face.

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despite his assertions that Joyce had already done this for him when she dragged him out of bed.

"So you are really awake at last!" exclaimed Joyce, determined to make one more attempt at finding from him some clue to the mystery.

"It isn't late yet. Besides, I should have been dressed before if it had not been for Bertha; she seems to think that I want as much looking after as Jimmy," said Dodge in a deeply disgusted tone, stroking his damp hair with one hand, while the other was thrust deep in his pocket.

"I want you to try and remember what Ellie and Tom were saying that time when you tried to overhear their talk," Joyce said, too worried about the strange flight to think of the harm it might do to the morals of Dodge to even seem to encourage him in eavesdropping.

"They found me out before I had time to hear anything except 'potatoes and a great noise,'" Dodge replied regretfully, thinking that if only he had been able to hear more he might have insisted on joining the expedition, in which case there would have been three children missing instead of only two.

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So it was with a feeling of keen disappointment that he stood at the back door looking at the rain, while Joyce tried in vain to think what the words "potatoes and a great noise," could have to do with the disappearance of Tom and Ellie.

Then Stevie and Sparkin came riding back in the rain, and before Joyce had time to commence upon her story of Ellie having disappeared as well as Tom, Stevie shouted out—

"Joyce, Joyce, we came home round by the wattle scrub, and what do you think? Everyone of the blacks have bolted! it looks as if they had cleared quickly, too, for spears, boomerangs, and no end of other things are lying about, as if they had been in too much hurry to stop for their belongings. Jolly good thing, isn't it, for the potatoes?"

But Joyce turned faint and sick with horror, wondering if the going of the blacks had aught to do with the absence of the children.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DESERTED CAMP

ALL that day it rained at Woolla as if it would never cease, pouring down in sheets, while Joyce and Bertha roamed from room to room in a state of anxiety which was almost too hard to endure ; but Stevie and Sparkin rode round in the drenching downpour, hunting for the missing children, or for some clue to the reason of their going.

"Stevie said the back door was unfastened this morning when he went out before dawn, so that was plainly the way they went," Joyce said for the twentieth time, sinking down on a chair in the sitting-room for a brief rest from her aimless wandering to and fro.

"They would naturally go out that way, for the bolts of the garden door squeak so badly," Bertha answered, as she too dropped wearily on to a seat. "Wherever they went,

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their going was most carefully planned, because you see they were sleeping in different rooms, and then, don't you remember that Sparkin said the puppies had been shut up last night ? "

" Did he say so ? " Joyce said, with such an absorbed air that Bertha began to wonder if she were going to be ill.

" Yes, it was at breakfast when he told us. He said it was the noise of their whining and crying which woke him up, and so made him aware of the rain. Tom must have shut them up last night to keep them from following him. You know those puppies are such inquisitive creatures, that they always want to follow any of us, just to see where we are going ; though Bruno is usually quite above that sort of thing."

" I wonder Bruno did not bark and rouse the place when they went out," Joyce said with another despairing sigh.

" Not likely that the old dog would bark at Tom or Ellie, he knows them too well," objected Bertha ; and then both girls were silent, until a cry from Jimmy, who was being taken care of by Dodge, started them to their feet again to see what ailed the baby.

" I should not feel so bad about it all if it

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were not for the rain, but this downpour shuts us in, making us feel so helpless," Joyce said presently, when Jimmy's crying having subsided, they were once more free to talk to each other.

"It is most probable that but for the rain they would have been home again before this," Bertha said, trying to cheer her sister, and, indeed, believing that her theory was a correct one. "Do try and not worry so much, Joyce, or you will make yourself ill."

"I cannot help it. Mother left the children in my care, and think how badly she will feel if harm comes to them."

"Of course, and so shall we. But it isn't our fault if they run away in the middle of the night," said Bertha with brusque common sense.

"It was very naughty of them to go like that, especially when they had promised mother that they would be so good," sighed Joyce again.

"But they were not meaning to be naughty, of that I feel quite sure, for neither Ellie nor Tom are bad children," rejoined Bertha, in warm defence of the absent two. "I expect they had some scheme on hand, which they

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thought would benefit somebody, and started to carry it out without counting the cost. Then this rain came on unexpectedly, and they cannot get home."

"If only I could think so!" sighed Joyce, beating her hands together with a despairing gesture as she listened to the pouring rain, and thought of Ellie, lightly clad, exposed to all its pitiless fury.

"You must try and think so, make yourself believe it against your will, or you will be ill," here a note of pleading crept into Bertha's voice. "Just think how dreadful it would be for us all if you made yourself sick now. I could not possibly take care of you, look after the house, and mind that poor baby; and there is no one who would come to help us, for, of course, mother could not leave father."

"I am not going to be ill, but I just feel as if I could not bear anything more," Joyce answered in an unsteady fashion, then dropping her face on her hands, burst into piteous weeping.

Bertha stole away and left her then, for she hated to see any one cry, especially when, as now, there was no chance of being able to give comfort.

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The tears, however, did Joyce more good than harm, and when she had had her cry out, she was if not more anxious at least not so despairing.

Stevie came home late in the afternoon as wet as if he had been sitting in a water-hole in spite of his oilskin. He said that Sparkin had taken a fresh horse and ridden off to the nearest station to see if anything had been heard of the children there.

"Have you been round the black's deserted camp?" Joyce asked. She was calm now, though very red-eyed and white-cheeked.

"Yes, we went there first, and if we can't hit on a clue to the whereabouts of the children to-night, I will send to Shirley and ask Mr. Knutsford to lend us his black tracker," Stevie said in a worried tone.

"There was nothing at the camp which made me think that the children had been there?" asked with a sick flutter at her heart, for ever since Stevie came home to breakfast, saying that the blacks had cleared, leaving their camp with such haste that they had left their spears behind, she had been convinced that their abrupt departure had something to do with the disappearance of Ellie and Tom.

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"We could not see anything, but then, as Sparkin said, a woman always gets the grip of things so much quicker than a man. I tell you what it is, Joyce, I wish you would ride over there with me now, it isn't raining quite so hard as it was, and a little wet won't hurt you," he said, going across the floor to peer out of the window.

"Of course, the wet will not hurt me, nor should I mind if it did. I will get ready at once, and Stevie, don't bring Buster for me to ride, I could not manage him to-day; let me have Sorrel or Slick-foot," she sprang to her feet as she spoke, intent on an immediate start.

"Slick-foot is dead beat: Sparkin rode him all the morning; but I will go and catch Sorrel for you," Stevie said, plunging out into the rain again, with the feeling in his heart that if Joyce went to search the deserted camp for herself, half his responsibility in the matter would be at an end.

The rain was lessening as he had said, while a break in the dun-coloured clouds gave promise of a fine sun-setting.

Stevie, although very anxious about the missing pair, was not so much disposed as Joyce to believe that disaster had overtaken them.

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It was the heavy rain which had kept them from coming home, he told himself; when it was fine they would turn up once more safe and sound, rather ashamed of 'heir prank, perhaps, and very hungry, but otherwise none the worse for the adventure.

"You lead, and I will follow," Joyce said, when the two were mounted and riding slowly down by the banksia hedge, while Bertha, with Jimmy in her arms, watched their departure from the verandah.

"Why?" asked Stevie, in surprise.

She laughed nervously. "If I ride by your side, I shall see only one side of the track, but if you are in front, then I can scan both sides as I pass, and perhaps I may find something which you and Sparkin overlooked."

Stevie nodded, but said no more, and riding forward put a good ten yards between himself and his sister, who rode a little bent forward in her saddle, casting swift searching glances from side to side, but speaking never a word.

They rode very near to the tree where Tom had struck the matches on the previous night, then cantered across the paddock to reach the slip rails on the farther side.

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They went by a longer track to the camp than the one which the missing pair had followed, so that the careful survey of Joyce bore no fruit.

When the miserable shelters, hardly worthy the title of huts, were reached, the two dismounted, tied their horses to the nearest tree, and proceeded to carefully examine the ground.

It was plain the blacks had gone in a great hurry and in wild confusion, but that was all the two could discover from the medley of articles thrown here and there, the half-burnt logs flung aside from the ash-heaps; and in one instance the partly devoured fragments of food, unwholesome-looking stuff but still food, was strewn on the ground.

"I never saw a black camp left in such a fashion," Joyce said in surprise, pausing by those fragments of unwholesome eatables, which comprised among other dainties two rather underdone frogs, for well she knew that however hard-pressed for time a black woman may be, the last thing that she will relinquish is the food which is so hard to obtain.

"That is well," Sparkin said, rejoined Stevie. "He told me, too, that a black tracker

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would most likely be able to understand why they bolted in such a hurry. Though, of course, it is only the wildest speculation that their going has anything to do with the disappearance of Ellie and Tom."

"Of course not," Joyce answered, in an abstracted fashion; then turning her back on Stevie, and walking straight past the place where the horses were tethered, she made her way through the dripping undergrowth towards the boundary fence of the cultivated grounds.

The rain had ceased entirely now, and a long level sunbeam struck across the dull wet world, brightening and transforming everything.

To Joyce it was like a message straight from heaven, a gleam of promise when everything else was dark and dreary. She was walking now along a barely defined track which led under the ledge upon which Ellie and Tom had perched to perform on the previous night. There was no clear idea in her mind as to why she had chosen that way, only it seemed to her that she was walking with a purpose, and so she kept straight on.

Stevie did not disturb her by word or sigh, only crept along in the rear more than

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half-awed by the rapt look on her face as she passed along the narrow track, alike heedless of the water shed upon her by the dripping herbage from above, and the swampy damp of the ground upon which she walked.

Presently with a sharp cry she stooped and picked something from the ground.

"What is it?" asked Stevie, pressing nearer to inspect the find.

"This, it is one of Ellie's," and Joyce held up a small pocket handkerchief with a coloured border, a soaking wet fragment, dirty and torn.

"Are you sure it is hers, or that she had it with her last night?" Stevie asked, as he spread out the wet rag to get a better look at it, and began to fear that matters were more serious even than he had believed them to be.

"I am sure it is one of Ellie's handkerchiefs; but I cannot be so sure that she had it with her and lost it last night. The children lose so many handkerchiefs, and this one might have been dropped a week or two ago, they often come as far from home as this, you know," Joyce said, trying hard to make herself believe that this handkerchief must have been lost in the fashion she had suggested.

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But Stevie shook his head with an air of complete bewilderment. The situation was getting beyond him entirely, for there seemed such an utter absence of motive in the movements of the children, unless they had done it on purpose to scare their elders, which was not to be believed for a moment.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked, after a long pause.

"I shall go straight on to the fence of the cultivated grounds. If they came this way last night they would climb that fence, and naturally they would tear their clothes," she answered, then went forward almost at a run.

There was no lack of evidence when the fence was reached, for fragments of brown holland and blue serge were sticking to the barbs of the wire, telling as plainly as speech that Tom and Ellie had passed that way not long before.

CHAPTER IX

FOUND BY DODGE

THE next morning dawned as fine as the previous one had been wet, but there was no lessening of the anxiety at Woolla.

Early in the morning Sparkin started for Mr. Knutsford's place at Shirley, in order to obtain the loan of a black-tracker, for it was evident now to every one concerned that Ellie and Tom were really lost, and the mystery of their going was for the time forced into the background by the mystery of where they could be now.

But it was thirty miles to Shirley, and even if Mr. Sparkin were so fortunate as to find the black-tracker at home, and available for instant service, it would be hours before they could reach Woolla, however hard they might ride. So there was still a time of torturing suspense and apprehension to be lived through before

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the real search for the missing ones could begin.

Just after Sparkin had ridden away, and while Stevie was planning with Joyce how much of the station work must be done, and how much might with safety be left to take care of itself, a horseman was seen coming out of the scrub and winding down the track past the flooded gums.

"Some one is coming," said Joyce, pointing to the approaching horseman. "Oh, Stevie, perhaps there is news at last," a wave of colour drifted into her pale face as she spoke, and the light of renewed hope came into her eyes.

"Don't count too much on that," replied the boy, gloomily. "Remember that if the children have really gone off with the blacks it may be days, weeks, even months, before we hear of them, because you see they have got such a start; then yesterday's rain would destroy the traces of their going, and make the task of tracking them so much more difficult."

"I know all that, but I must keep hoping for news, and expecting it every minute, or I don't think I could go on enduring the days as they come," the elder sister said with a painful catch

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in her voice, which brought an uncomfortable lump into Stevie's throat also.

"It looks like Bert Tuckwell. I'll go and meet him," said the boy gruffly; he was thinking that if the horseman were the bearer of news, and it should chance to be bad, it might be as well that he should hear it first, so he started off at a smart pace down the slope through garden and orchard, leaving Joyce standing alone on the verandah.

The horseman was, as he thought, Bert Tuckwell, whose place had been raided and burnt by cattle-duffers only a few nights before. Since that disaster Bert had been camping among the ruins, waiting for his brother's return, and looking after such property as the thieves had overlooked, or had not cared to take away.

Hearing of the trouble at Woolla, he had ridden over this morning to see if he could render any assistance in searching for the lost children, or in doing such of the station work as could not be neglected, even at a time like this.

"Joyce and I were hoping that you had brought us news of some sort," remarked Stevie, as he walked back up the slope by the side of the horseman.

Found by Dodge

"Do you think I should have ridden at such an easy pace if there had been any news to tell?" the young man asked with an almost offended air. Then he said, "I suppose you've hit on no clue to where they may have gone?"

"Nothing more than what we found yesterday by the black's deserted camp. Sparkin has just started for Shirley to bring back Mr. Knutsford's black-tracker. I only wish we had sent for him yesterday, but until we found those things near the miasms in the swamp, we just thought the children had gone off on some prank of their own and were kept from coming back by the rain," Stevie explained, a little out of breath from the rapid walk up the hill, for the sun was getting very hot.

"I see," replied Bert with a nod. Then after a moment of silence, he went on in a brisker tone, "I suppose you won't begin any sort of a regular search until the tracker comes?"

"Joyce says no, hard though it is to stand still and do nothing; but any searching on our part now may help to destroy traces that the tracker might find to be valuable clues," Stevie answered.

"She is right about that; but there is no

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need to stand still and do nothing, I can stay and help you, we will round up a mob of fresh horses, and have them handy in the home paddock, for no one can say how hard, or how far, we may have to ride to-morrow. Then we will just get through as much station-work as can be reeled off before Sparkin gets back with the tracker, so as to be quite ready to start at the first possible moment. You might ask your sister to get a batch of damper cooked, some tea and sugar packed, then no time need be lost over waiting for food."

Stevie looked up at the horseman in considerable surprise: he had always rather despised Bert Tuckwell, had even called him a coward on more occasions than one, but after all there must be something uncommonly good in him, to make him come to the rescue in this fashion.

"Come in and talk to Joyce, it will comfort her to hear you plan things, and to know that you are going to stay and help," the boy said with a faltering choke in his voice.

"Oh, I'm going to stay and help," Bert answered cheerily. "The cattle-duffers have saved me the trouble of tending store, don't you see, and as I always did hate selling sugar and

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bacon, I've just got to show myself grateful for my freedom by chipping in and helping where I'm wanted most."

He entered the house with Stevie, then stopped suddenly with a look of surprise as the wail of a baby was heard.

"I didn't know you'd company?" he said, with a certain brusqueness of manner.

"Nor have we, except Jimmy, and I don't know as he might not be regarded as one of the family by this time," Stevie said, taking Bert straight into the kitchen, where Joyce and Bertha were both busy with household tasks, while Jimmy lay on the floor yelling lustily because there was no one at liberty to nurse him.

"Oh, I say, youngster, you must have uncommonly good lungs," remarked the young man, stopping to pick up the baby as he crossed the room.

Jimmy instantly stopped crying, commencing instead to chuckle and crow with delight, possibly the strong grasp of the arms in which he was held made him think of his father, who had ridden away into the night, escaping from justice.

"You did not know about Jimmy, I suppose,"

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said Joyce, as she briefly put the visitor in possession of as much of the baby's history as she knew herself.

"Well, Mrs. Paynter must have a kind heart to take in a cattle-duffer's baby!" exclaimed Bert, in surprise.

"She could not refuse, the poor mite must have died of hardship if she had not," put in Bertha. "Then just think what it saved us from. You had to take refuge in the scrub, and watch your house being burned, and your property destroyed, but we suffered nothing at all at the hands of the thieves."

Bert shook his head with a solemn air. "On the whole, I think it is a good thing they burnt the store, instead of offering me Jimmy as a permanent boarder. Of course, he might have eaten that batch of condensed milk that we've never been able to sell, since all the people have taken to keeping milking-cows; but if he often makes as much noise as he was doing when I came in, he would be worse than an alarm clock."

"Poor Jimmy, he hates to be indoors, but there is no one to take him out just now, because Dodge went off somewhere just after breakfast,

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and has not come back yet," said Joyce, taking the baby from the young man, tying a shady hat on his little round head ; then stowing him into the home-made waggon, which she trundled out under the shade of the banksia hedge, calling to Bruno to come and keep guard.

"Here comes Dodge. Why, what is the matter with the boy ? " exclaimed Bert, who had come to the back door to see Joyce settle Jimmy in the waggon, and then caught sight of a small boy in a big flapping hat coming at a run towards the house, waving his short arms in wild excitement and shouting as he came.

Joyce turned pale, catching at the verandah post to steady herself, for in her mind was the thought that Dodge had come upon traces of the missing ones, and that his news was not good.

"A cloo !" he was shouting. "I've got a cloo !" But he was by this time so thoroughly winded with his run that other explanation was beyond him.

Stevie came running out, followed by Bertha, and it was an eager, excited group which surrounded the small boy as he came to a stop by the back door, holding something tightly clasped in one hand, and panting for breath.

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"What is it Dodge, what have you found?" demanded Joyce, sharply, her face quivering with anxiety.

"This," and the small boy's plump brown fist was opened, to disclose a half-burned match lying on the palm.

"Where did you find it?" said Stevie, with a sudden remembrance of the abstracted match-box.

"Inside the hollow tree in the paddock, where we used to play at hermits, the cave was just big enough for one to live in comfortably—I mean the tree was," corrected Dodge, trying very hard to tell his story coherently, yet panting still from the haste he had made. "I thought I'd track round a bit this morning, same as the black-trackers do, you know. So when I'd been going a long way with my nose nearly on the ground I caught sight of the tree, and something made me think I might as well take a look inside, and there I saw a heap of half-burned matches, so I knew that I had found a cloo."

"Come and show me the place," said Bert, holding out his hand to Dodge. "Suppose you come, too, Miss Paynter, then perhaps we shall get some daylight on the mystery."

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Joyce put on her hat, and went off with Bert and the little boy ; but Bertha remained to look after the house and Jimmy, while Stevie had to attend to some business which could no longer be neglected.

Half an hour later Joyce came hurrying back, her face a study in perplexity.

"Bertha, have you missed father's French horn?" she asked, coming into the kitchen holding a little blue tassel in her hand.

"It is in the cupboard in the sitting-room, I believe. I remember seeing it one day when mother turned the cupboard out, before father went to Geraldton," Bertha said, in surprise.

"Come and show me where it ought to be," Joyce said, with a little gesture of entreaty, almost as if she were afraid to face going alone ; and greatly wondering Bertha followed.

The cupboard in the sitting-room was a movable affair made of polished jarrah-wood, and filled with a great assortment of household treasures, such as the best tea-service, which was rarely used, because it had belonged to Mr. Paynter's mother in far-away England, and had been sent out to Australia, as a keepsake, after the old lady's death. A lot of books and loose

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music were also stored in the cupboard, with fancy tea-cloths, table centres, and other articles of refinement and luxury not in everyday use in pioneer households such as that of Woolla. But certainly there was no French horn in the cupboard, as Bertha saw at the very first glance.

"Some one has taken it away, Joyce, it always used to hang there," she cried.

"I know," answered the elder sister, swaying dizzily as if about to fall. "I have seen it hanging there myself, with this blue tassel fastened to it. But, Bertha, we found the tassel just beyond the heap of half-burned matches in the hollow tree, and so it seems pretty plain that the children must have taken it with them; it also confirms what Dodge says he overheard about a great noise. Oh, what can it all mean?"

But Bertha could only shake her head, echoing dumbly—

"What can it all mean?"

CHAPTER X

OUT WITH THE TRACKER

IT was sundown before Sparkin returned from Shirley with the black-tracker, but they did not come alone, Mr. Knutsford had ridden over with them, and Lewis Daly, the Jackeroo, so called because he paid for the privilege of being at Shirley and learning how to farm after West Australian methods, instead of being paid for the work he did.

There was no question of beginning the search until the next morning, as daylight was the first necessity for the work of tracking the missing pair, but directly supper was done, the whole company lay down to get as much sleep as possible under the circumstances, since no one could say how far they might travel, or how hard they might fare on the following day.

Joyce and Bertha had prepared a bountiful supper for the friendly neighbours who had come

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to help them in their trouble, and acting on the advice of Bert Tuckwell, had baked a big batch of bread in thin flat cakes, locally called damper, for the searchers to carry with them when they started on their quest.

Mr. Knutsford was a kind-looking, elderly man, who had boys and girls of his own ; and his sympathy with the troubled young people at Woolla was of a very real and practical sort.

Joyce found him smoking a pipe on the verandah after supper, and tried to thank him, though with a catch in her breath, for his goodness in coming to their help.

" My dear, it is only how your father would have come to Shirley if it had been my children who were lost instead of his."

" Poor father and poor mother ! " murmured Joyce, keeping back her tears by a great effort. " If only they can be spared the knowledge of the trouble until it is over, how glad and thankful we shall be."

" If it ends happily, yes," Mr. Knutsford said gravely. " But although we must hope to the very last, it is of no use hiding the fact that our search may end in bitter sorrow."

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"I know," Joyce answered faintly, her face as white as her blouse.

"However, your parents could not have done more than has been done, if they had been here," Mr. Knutsford went on in a more cheerful tone.

"You and Stevie have acted in the wisest possible fashion, and you may depend on us to do our very best if the tracker only finds us a clue that we can follow to-morrow; the great difficulty is that the purpose of the children in starting off is such a mystery."

"Yes, we have no clue at all as to why they went. We only know from Dodge that they had some great plan in their heads, but when he tried to do a little eavesdropping, all he heard were the words, 'Potatoes and a great noise,' " replied Joyce.

"Well?" queried Mr. Knutsford, for there was a look on her face as of something kept back.

"To-day, Dodge, who was doing a little tracking on his own account, found in a hollow tree in which the children sometimes play, a little heap of half-burned matches, and a blue silk tassel. The night when the children went Stevie's match-box was missing, having evidently

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been taken by Tom, and the blue silk tassel must have dropped from a French horn of father's, which to-day we discovered missing."

"How do you connect the two?" he asked, keenly interested, for he knew very well that if only they could arrive at the children's motive in going, they might probably find great help in the work of searching for them.

"Bertha thinks that some time during the day the children must have hidden in the tree such things as they meant to take with them, and then, at night, the matches were struck through fear lest they might in the darkness touch a snake in getting them out. But why they took the horn is a great puzzle, unless, indeed, it was to make the great noise about which Dodge heard them talking," Joyce said in a troubled tone, little guessing how near the truth this version of the case really was.

"I should like to have a talk to Dodge; has he gone to bed?" Mr. Knutsford said with a start.

"No, we have been so busy, Bertha and I, that we have kept him up to look after Jimmy, the cattle-duffer's baby, you know, which was left in mother's care; but I am afraid you won't

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get much from Dodge ; we have found it quite hopeless work questioning him."

" At least I can try ; but don't tell him that I want to question him," said Mr. Knutsford, as after some fumbling in his pockets he produced a home-made whistle formed out of a bulrush stem, with holes bored in the side for the purpose of producing a variety of sounds. " You can say to him that my boy Joey gave me this to give Dodge Paynter, and if he comes quickly I will show him how to play it."

Joyce went off in search of Dodge, though with very little hope in her heart that any more information could be elicited from him.

Dodge was only too thankful to be relieved from the duties of nursemaid, which he only performed under protest. He was not at all shy ; moreover, Mr. Knutsford was an old friend, and he was soon chatting eagerly, and displaying his musical abilities on the bulrush whistle, in the use of which he needed no instruction, being already proficient.

" We used to have three of them, but Ellie broke hers and threw it away, that day after she played on Mr. Sparkin's fiddle and frightened me so badly," Dodge remarked in a confidential tone.

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"You don't mean to say that you were frightened at a fiddle!" exclaimed Mr. Knutsford, affecting great merriment, although in reality he was keenly intent on learning as much of the little boy's mind as possible.

"It was such a great noise, and Ellie made the thing howl like a Joono," Dodge said, with a shiver.

"What is a Joono?" demanded Mr. Knutsford.

"The things the blacks are afraid of. I don't know what they are, but Booja said they were horrible. Are the Shirley blacks afraid of them?" the little boy questioned.

"I expect so, they need to be afraid of something," replied Mr. Knutsford, then drew from Dodge the story of how he and Ellie had turned over the contents of Mr. Sparkin's clothes-box, and made music for themselves of a dismal sort on the violin.

Later that evening, when Dodge was fast asleep and most of the people at Woolla were at rest, Mr. Knutsford stepped across to the little hut where Sparkin slept, and softly knocked at the door.

A gruff "come in" sounded from the interior

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in response to the knock, and pushing open the door, Mr. Knutsford crossed the threshold.

Sparkin, who was busy doing some repairs to his wardrobe, looked up in surprise on seeing who it was that had knocked.

"I thought it was Stevie come to ask me about something, or I would have opened the door for you, sir."

"That is all right," replied the owner of Shirley in a genial tone. Then closing the door behind him he said with an abrupt change of voice, "Would you mind looking into your clothes-box to see if your violin is where it should be?"

"How did you know that I'd got a violin?" asked Sparkin, as he put down his sewing, and turned to the box which stood in one corner.

"From Dodge," replied Mr. Knutsford, then stood silent while Sparkin dived to the bottom of the clothes-box, and drew forth the violin case, which when opened he found to be empty.

"Why, the fiddle is gone!" exclaimed in blank amazement.

"I thought so," remarked Mr. Knutsford, drawing a long breath. "Then it is pretty clear that the children's intention in going off in that

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mysterious fashion was to frighten the blacks, and judging from the manner in which the camp was left, they must have managed the work pretty successfully. But the puzzle is, what happened to the children afterwards? "

"It is also a puzzle to me how they found out that I had got a violin at all, for I don't know that I've ever taken it out of the case since I've been at Woolla," Sparkin said slowly, looking as if he could not get over his bewilderment.

"Children find out most things, especially when boxes are left unlocked or keys are lying about," Mr. Knutsford answered, then he told Sparkin of what he had learned from Dodge that evening.

When Mr. Knutsford went back to the house, he told Joyce about Sparkin's fiddle having been taken, and that he believed the children must have been meaning to frighten the blacks with a wild and unaccountable noise.

"But where could they have gone afterwards?" asked the harassed elder sister.

"That is where the mystery lies that only God can make clear to us," Mr. Knutsford said, with a touch of solemnity in his tone. He was

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an earnest Christian, and knew where to turn for help when the perplexities of life were too great for him to face.

Joyce clasped her hands in nervous despair. "I feel as if it were all just too bad to be borne alone!" she exclaimed, with a sob catching her breath.

"But you need not bear it alone, when you have a Heavenly Friend who will help you in every time of trial. Have you implored Him to share this burden, Joyce?" Mr. Knutsford asked kindly.

"Yes, but there seemed no answer," she said sadly.

"Shall we ask again? Perhaps the prayer is being answered already, only we have had no eyes to see it. Let us have family worship to-night, and ask that our search to-morrow may lead to success," said Mr. Knutsford.

Joyce rose at once and fetched a Bible from the bookshelf, which she put into his hands, saying jerkily—

"We haven't had prayers since mother went to take care of father, but now I will go and call them all to come."

Woolla was so far away from any church that

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the father of the young Paynters always held a service for his household every Sunday, and had prayers in the week when the stress of work allowed them to come together for worship. But never had there been such a moving service as on the night when Mr. Knutsford read about the pillar of fire which went before the children of Israel, and prayed for Divine guidance in the search for the missing children.

Joyce and Stevie both felt better after that, and although Bertha cried herself to sleep, even she was comforted when she awoke in the morning.

The sun had not yet risen, and the break-o'-day-boys were still shrilling sweetly when the search party, all mounted and each one with a bundle of provisions sufficient for three or four days, rode out from Woolla and took the direction of the blacks' deserted camp.

The tracker was a diminutive black man, with a great crop of matted curly hair hanging about his shoulders, he was mounted on a horse like the others at present, but later on, when the real search began, he would be half the time on all fours, squinting here and peering there, seeing plainly visible signs where other people could

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discern only dust or mud. His name was Biboo, and although he knew a little English, he never would speak it, if by any means he could make himself understood in his own tongue.

When the party drew near to the camp they all stopped, then Biboo slid from the back of his horse, and giving the rein to the nearest man to hold, disappeared among the bushes, and was seen no more for over an hour.

No one ventured to hurry him, and the waiting group talked only in whispers and undertones, as if fearful lest the sound of their voices might disturb the searching of the black man on whom so much depended.

Stevie was with the searchers, but Sparkin had remained at Woolla to take care of the station and the little remnant of the family still left in the home. Pearce also had come down from Bandicoot Gully, leaving Towler to manage as best he could alone ; while Mr. Knutsford, Bert Tuckwell, and two other neighbours made up a group of six searchers, who might presently have to break up into two or three groups to ride wherever the tracker thought best, but were just now waiting, almost with bated breath, the

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result of Biboo's examination of the deserted miahs.

"Here he comes," jerked out Stevie at length, when a rustle in the bushes broke in upon a long spell of utter silence.

Just then Biboo's shaggy head appeared above the fringe of bulrushes and tall grasses bordering the thicket of black wattels that stretched between the cultivated grounds and the camp, and he at once began an excited account to Mr. Knutsford in blacks' language of what he had discovered in his searching.

Bert Tuckwell knew Biboo's dialect fairly well, while Stevie understood a good many of the words, but the others had to wait with what patience they could muster until the queer speech was translated for their benefit, Mr. Knutsford and Bert sharing the office of interpreter between them.

"All black fellows go to sleep in dark night," began Biboo, with many flourishes of the lean dusky arms showing through the ragged sleeves of his dirty cotton jacket.

"What then?" demanded Mr. Knutsford sharply, for a vacant look had stolen into Biboo's beady black eyes.

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"Something woke them all at once, and then there was a fight," Biboo announced stolidly.

"A fight?" Mr. Knutsford looked as amazed as he felt, Bert Tuckwell gave a low whistle of surprise, but Stevie, who had dismounted and was standing by the side of his horse, turned sick and giddy, gripping hard at the saddle against which he leaned in order to keep himself from falling.

"Were they fighting among themselves, or with another party of blacks?" asked Bert.

"Don't know," responded Biboo, sullenly; and then he told Mr. Knutsford that the blacks had not merely been fighting, but that some of them had been wounded, for there were bloodstains here and there, where the rain had had no chance to wash them away.

"But the missing children, did you find no trace of them?" asked Mr. Knutsford, eagerly.

"White children not been near the camp," asserted Biboo, and nothing could turn him from his belief.

CHAPTER XI

IN PURSUIT

"**W**HAT is the next thing to do?" said Mr. Knutsford, with a blank look round on the assembled group.

For a brief moment no one answered, then Stevie burst out—

"It seems to me that the only thing to do is to pursue those blacks, and find out from them what they know about the children, for we know very well that Ellie and Tom crossed the fence from the cultivated grounds, even though they might not have actually been close to the miahs."

"Yes, I think we ought to go after the blacks, if only to find out why they departed in a hurry," Bert Tuckwell said, in a decision, and the two neighbours also held this opinion; but Mr. Knutsford begged them not to be in too much hurry at the start, because it was possible that by patient waiting for Biboo,

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he might light upon some clue which would lead them straight, and so save much time in the end.

Every one agreed to this, and another hour and a half crept slowly away, while Biboo worked with perspiring energy, starting from that part of the fence, where the rag fragments still fluttered from the barbed wire, and stretching out in wider, and wider circles until he could find some trace of the direction taken by the lost ones.

But the heavy rain that had fallen had completely washed away any sign which might have been of use, and presently Biboo, who was almost ready to drop with fatigue, declared that he could find no clue anywhere.

"We will follow the blacks then. Well mounted as we are, it should not be difficult to overhaul them, say, in a couple of days," Mr. Knutsford decided, and every one approved his decision.

There was a quick movement towards the horses then, and every one being mounted, Biboo rode on ahead, the rest following a short distance behind.

For the first six miles or so Biboo held

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steadily on a course running due north, over open grassy country with many water-courses bordered by lines of white gums.

Then came a wide stretch of salt marshes, haunted by ducks and sulphur-crested white cockatoos. Here Biboo lost the track of the retreating natives, and the best part of another hour was spent before it could be found again.

The first night's camp was made in a narrow valley, down which rushed a noisy little brook on its way to join the wider river two miles low.

It was not a cheerful party by any means which gathered about the supper-fire; every one seemed oppressed and dispirited, for the day's search had brought no fruit at all, except the knowledge conveyed to them by Biboo through his interpreters, that they were following hard on a party of sixteen blacks, some of whom were children, who were retreating in hot haste, and that these fugitives might probably be overhauled by the day after to-morrow.

All the horses being hobbled, no watch was kept that night, but when morning came it was found that three of the animals had wandered and could not be found.

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Stevie and Bert Tuckwell, whose horses were not among the missing, at once volunteered as searchers and rode off, eating their breakfast as they went.

The animals which had wandered had unfortunately broken their hobbles, which made the search for them much longer and more arduous.

The morning wore on, the sun mounted higher and higher, but though Bert and Stevie still followed the track of the straying horses, which had all kept together, they had not come up with them; evidently they had broken the hobbles early in the evening, and had therefore been at liberty for many hours, for there was no traces of hurry in their going, the creatures apparently having just wandered as they fed.

It was within an hour of noon before they came upon the three horses, standing in a pool of water under the shade of a line of white gum trees, and looking as placidly content as if they were the most well-behaved of their kind.

Stevie was by this time in a state of raging impatience, and, left to himself, would doubtless have dashed in among the truants at top speed, very likely with the result of frightening them

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all away, and so having his work to do over again.

"Go as gently as possible," urged his more cautious companion; "or if you feel too wrathful for mild measures, get off and let me lead your animal into the water with mine, as if it were a pack horse, then I shall be able to secure the whole lot; we don't want to do any more chasing this bout!"

"No, indeed we don't," assented Stevie, warmly; then feeling that he could not trust his much-tried temper any further, slid from his horse, and left Bert to lead it into the pool.

The water in which the horses were standing was one of a chain of pools, connected by a narrow thread of a water-way, which at some parts of the year would be a respectable-sized river.

Choosing out one of the cleanest-looking of the pools, Stevie was just stooping down to have a drink, when his attention was arrested by some footmarks on the soft sand bordering the pool at which he was about to drink.

Plainly some natives had recently passed that way, and he looked at the tracks in the tell-tale sand, wondering if these were the same

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party which Biboo was following, when he was startled to see the print of a shoe beside those naked footmarks.

Treading cautiously now, through fear of defacing one of the traces through accident, he came round to the other side of the water and stood close to the mark which had caused his heart to beat so fast. It was the print of a rather small shoe, most likely Tom's, Stevie told himself, as with a wildly beating heart he stooped lower over the clue so strangely found.

"Bert," he called, "Bert, come here," but his voice was so strained and hoarse that the sound of it seemed to carry no further than his throat, and he had to call again and again before his companion's attention was arrested.

"What is the matter?" shouted Bert, in a cheery tone; he had secured the three straying horses, and was so pleased with his success, that nothing else seemed to him of much consequence just then.

"The children have been this way; there are bootmarks as well as footprints on the sand by that pool. Do you get down and have a look while I hold the horses," Stevie said,

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running towards the young man, who was just riding out of the water with the five horses.

"Are you sure?" demanded Bert, in great amazement, as he slipped from the saddle, gave Stevie the bunch of horses to hold, and prepared to examine the matter for himself.

"I am positive," rejoined Stevie, with emphasis; he just shook with excitement as he stood holding the horses, and waiting for Bert to come back.

"They are children's foot-marks plainly," said the young man, when he came back after a careful inspection of the prints on the sand.

"But the puzzle to me is why Biboo has seen no such marks before, and you know he has stuck to it that the children were not with the company of blacks that we have been tracking all the way from Woolla."

"Perhaps the two parties divided, one coming this way and one going the other," said Stevie, as he swung himself into the saddle.

"We shall see. What we have to do now is to ride back to last night's camp as hard as we can go, and we must not blame the horses for wandering either, if through that accident we hit on the trail of the children," Bert said, as

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changing his saddle on to one of the horses that had wandered, he prepared for the return journey.

They took careful note of the position of the pool where the marks were found, then rode across country as straight as they could go for the camping place, and as they now rode straight, without any of the twisting and turning which before had been necessary in tracking the horses, the journey back was made in about half the time the first part had occupied.

When they reached the camp, however, it was only to meet keen disappointment, for they found that Biboo and Mr. Knutsford had gone forward early in the morning, leaving the horseless riders to await the return of the others, and so by this time they would be many miles away.

"What is to be done now?" demanded Stevie, in a tone of despair, as he looked at Bert, who, in the absence of Mr. Knutsford, took naturally the position of leader.

"There can be no two opinions about that: we must ride after Mr. Knutsford and the tracker as hard as we can, tell them what we have found, and see if Biboo can bring us back

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to the river by a nearer route than this," Bert answered.

"We promised to let Joyce know when we came on the first trace of the children. Do you think Pearce ought to start back now?" Stevie said, as he ruefully admitted to himself that to go forward was the only thing to be done, badly as he wanted to go back to follow up the new clue so lately discovered.

"Certainly he must go back now. There is no sense in his going forward with us, since every mile will lengthen the time before your sister can hear the news," Bert decided.

Then as discipline and prompt obedience were the ruling principles of a search party like this, Pearce put the saddle on his horse, filled his water bottle at the spring by which they had camped, and prepared to do the solitary journey back to Woolla, where his coming was so anxiously awaited by Joyce and Bertha.

"Any message, besides the news, I mean?" Pearce asked, when he had mounted, and was about to ride in one direction while the rest of the party went the opposite way.

"Tell Joyce to keep her heart up, and that we are doing all we can," Stevie answered, but

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with a little choke in his voice, as he realized how unsatisfactory the news would prove to the anxious elder sister. But she had exacted a solemn promise from them, that Pearce should return directly some clue was discovered, and the promise must be kept.

He knew that Joyce would worry more now than she had done previously. Hitherto there had been the hope that the missing pair might be discovered at some lonely shepherd's hut or outlying station. But those bootmarks on the sand, beside the prints of naked feet, showed conclusively that Ellie and Tom were with a party of natives.

Probably they were prisoners, though such a state of things as white children being captured by blacks had never been heard of in the country round Woolla, not at least in Stevie's time. As a rule the blacks found so much difficulty in finding sufficient food for themselves, that they took particularly good care not to burden themselves with unnecessary mouths to feed.

Pearce was soon a vanishing speck on the wide grassy horizon, as Bert saw when he looked back. But for a long hour after they rode away

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from the camping-place, Stevie neither lifted his head nor spoke, only rode blindly forward, seeing nothing of the way they were going, but picturing always the sight of Joyce and Bertha's misery when they heard the news Pearce had to tell them. Of his mother he dared not trust himself to think at all, or, big boy that he was—a man almost in his own estimation—he would have broken down and sobbed aloud in his utter wretchedness.

The other three spoke very little, only dropping a word now and then as to the direction to be taken, but all the time pushing their horses as hard as the animals could go.

"It is going to rain," Bert remarked a little before sundown, when the question of camping had been discussed and settled, for they could not follow in the track of Mr. Knutsford and Biboo after darkness had fallen, and there seemed nothing for it but to stay where they were.

"I'm afraid it is," said one of the neighbours with a sorrowful shake of his head. "Though, if we had only found the children, the coming of the rain would have been the best blessing we could have had."

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"Well, they can't be far in front now; most likely we shall overhaul them to-morrow. I know they had a good start, but then we have had good horses, which should make all the difference," Bert answered with such determined cheerfulness, that it affected the whole party more or less, even bringing a ray of comfort to Stevie's anxious heart.

CHAPTER XII

WAITING FOR NEWS

THE days at Woolla were very full of hard work after the search party left. Stevie's absence threw a double share of responsibility on the shoulders of Joyce, while Pearce being away also, made Sparkin more extra work than he could get through, so that the girls, and even Dodge, had often to turn their hands to all kinds of duties that must be attended to without delay.

Jimmy, for the most part, amused himself by rolling about on the floor, and in making valiant efforts towards walking by pulling himself up to a standing position by the aid of chairs and benches; but as these attempts mostly ended in falls and wailing, no one wished him to repeat the performance too often.

Dodge fed the calves, rounded up the geese

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every night, with the help of Bruno and the puppies, hunted for eggs, and one day killed a snake, a feat of valour about which he talked so constantly that no one had even the remotest chance of forgetting about it.

But busy as he was running to and fro doing all sorts of things and making himself useful generally, Dodge missed Ellie and Tom so very badly, that tears would come up in his eyes in spite of all his efforts to keep them back, and he was so constantly rubbing dirty fists into his eyes that his face was never clean, despite the energetic efforts of Joyce and Bertha with soap, sponge, and towel.

Every hour now might bring Pearce back with news, and some one, it was mostly Dodge, was always on the look-out for some sign of an approaching horseman.

There had always seemed to be so much life at Woolla, that no one had time to feel lonely, or to realize how solitary the place really was. But now, with father and mother gone, Ellie and Tom missing, and Stevie away searching, such a great blank had come into the daily life that the few who were left felt strangely forlorn and desolate, while the great paddocks

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and vast sheep-runs about Woolla seemed like the wilderness pure and simple.

In the late afternoon, the third day after the searchers had left Woolla, Dodge having got the geese safely housed beyond the reach of prowling dingoes, was sitting on the topmost of the sliding bars, watching the landscape from the vantage of the paddock fence, when his sharp eyes saw the figure of a horseman winding in and out among the little pools and the lines of gum trees marking out the river's track along the wide valley.

Dodge gave a jump at the sight, and sticking two fingers in his mouth sent a shrill "cooey" out to greet the rider, who at present was too far away to be identified.

A minute later an answering cooey came back; when he heard it, Dodge scrambled down from his perch on the top bar, and ran at the top of his speed towards the house.

Joyce, in the absence of Sparkin, had been to milk the cows, which, for the sake of convenience, were pastured in the home paddock. It was always rather an ordeal to her to face the cows, which were wild and not easy to manage; but Sparkin had shown her an easy

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method of roping them, so that they could neither run away nor kick, and now that she had mastered the art of fixing them up firmly before commencing to milk, she had lost the worst of her nervousness about the task.

She was emptying the milk into the pans set ready for it, and telling Bertha of the difficulty she had found in roping the last cow, when there came a quick run of feet outside the house, and then they heard Dodge shouting—

"Joyce, Bertha, there is a man coming along the river track on a horse, and I think it is Pearce, so I expect that there is news at last."

"Pearce, did you say? Where?" and setting down the empty milk-pail in a great hurry, Joyce ran out to the front verandah to see if she could catch a glimpse of the approaching horseman riding up through the orchard.

"Oh, he is not near enough for any one to know who it is yet, but when I cooeyed to him he answered back, and Pearce always does that, you know," replied Dodge, who was panting from the rapidity of his run.

"Perhaps it is not Pearce at all," suggested

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Bertha, who had followed Joyce out to the verandah, picking up Jimmy on the way.

"But he cooeyed," persisted Dodge, with an air of utter conviction.

"A good many people do that," Joyce said, as she strained her gaze to catch the first sight of the horseman when he should begin to climb the sloping track between the orchard trees. "I do not think Pearce would be likely to come that way either. I have somehow always expected that he would come in by the track from Bandicoot Gully."

"Here he comes!" exclaimed Bertha, whose quick eyes had caught the first glimpse of the rider as he began to ascend the slope. "But it is not Pearce, I am sure, for this man rides as if he were afraid of falling off his horse. just as a new chum would ride."

Joyce did not reply, but stood with one hand pressed against her side, intently watching the approaching horseman and trying hard to think where she had seen him before. Strangers were by no means common at Woolla, and this man had even at the distance something familiar in his manner.

Dodge also was silent. He had been so

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certain that it was Pearce who had cooeied to him from the river track, and he had run to the house as fast as his feet could carry him, expecting to hear that Ellie and Tom had been found ; so the disappointment of knowing that it was not Pearce at all seemed almost too great to be borne.

"I know who it is !" cried Bertha, with a start and a ring of joyfulness in her tone, which fairly surprised the others. "It is Charlie Montcalm, that very nice young man who came from Geraldton to fetch mother. Perhaps he has come to bring us news of how father is getting on."

"Oh, I hope it is not bad news. I don't feel as if I could bear it," Joyce said, with a sobbing sigh.

"You will be able to bear what has got to be borne ; people always do," rejoined Bertha, with sound common sense, although her tone sounded rather unsympathetic ; but then a dreary feeling of dread was filling her own heart, and her limbs were shaking so much that she could scarcely stand up under the weight of Jimmy.

"Good evening !" called the rider, as he

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came within hailing distance. Then, seeing how white and set were the faces of the two girls, he waved his hat, shouting, "I am bringing good news this time!"

"Do you hear, Joyce, it is good news, so dear father must be better!" cried Bertha joyfully, as she left off trembling and began to prance up and down the verandah in a festive fashion, tossing Jimmy in her arms, while Dodge let off a wild whoop of delight and darted off to meet the arriving horseman and get some details of the good news before his sisters.

But in this he was disappointed, for Charlie Montcalm did not slacken speed to satisfy the curiosity of the small boy, but rode straight on to where the girls stood waiting on the verandah.

"I should have been here sooner only I lost the track yesterday in coming from Cadwallader, and we, that is my horse and I, were wandering all night; but we found our way again when morning broke and have come on as fast as we could," the young man said, in a cheerful tone, as he slid from his saddle at the verandah steps.

"Did mother send you?" asked Joyce, finding her voice by an effort.

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"Not in the first place. I had to come on business to see Mr. Bruce, at Cadwallader; then, when Mrs. Paynter heard that I was coming this way, she asked me to just call round and say that Mr. Paynter is doing finely, and that they hope to be back at Woolla in ten days or a fortnight at the outside," Charlie Montcalm answered, speaking of calling in on his way back from Cadwallader as if that place were only a short distance down the river and not twenty long miles away across a rough and difficult country, where it was almost impossible to follow the track.

"Oh, how tired you must be!" cried Joyce, on hospitable thoughts intent. "Please turn your horse into the near paddock; there is plenty of water in the trough there, and the feed is good, then come indoors for supper. Dodge, run and slip the rails down for Mr. Montcalm, then he will be quicker."

"Thank you, my appetite is pretty keen," the young man said, laughing as he turned away with his horse; then, impelled by a sudden thought, he stopped abruptly, wheeled round and said, "Oh, your mother sent her dear love to you all, and she hopes that the children are

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not giving you any trouble. Is anything the matter? have I said anything wrong?"

The last words were jerked out in an apologetic fashion, because of the change which had come over the faces of the sisters, on hearing the message from their mother.

"We are in very great trouble, but we had hoped to keep it from father and mother until the worst was over; but now that you have come and are going back to Geraldton, they will, of course, have to know," Joyce answered, striving with all her might to speak calmly.

"What is the trouble?" he asked quickly.

"Ellie and Tom have been missing for days; a search party are out in quest of them now, guided by the black tracker from Shirley, that is Mr. Knutsford's place, you know. But this is the third day from the start and we have had no news yet, although we are expecting every hour that some message will come. Indeed, when Dodge saw you riding up the valley, he thought it was the messenger coming with news about the children, and that was why he cooeyed to you."

"It was a pleasant welcome, and made me feel as if I were coming home. I am very grateful

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to Dodge," said the young man, and picking up the small boy he set him on the horse to ride to the near paddock.

When the horse had been attended to, the two came back to supper, and Sparkin returning from Bandicoot Gully at about the same time the household all sat down to supper together.

The table was spread abundantly with such things as were grown on the station, great bowls of corn porridge with jugs of milk, a roast goose as a change from mutton, with fruit and vegetables from orchard and garden.

During the meal Charlie Montcalm was told the whole story of the going of the missing children, and when he had heard it he dropped into such a thoughtful mood that Bertha, who wanted to hear all about her father and mother, could hardly get a word out of him, to her great dissatisfaction.

Sparkin, who wanted tidings of how things were going on in the town, and how the district elections were turning, was similarly disappointed, and presently went off, as was his usual habit, to smoke his pipe in solitude, sitting on the bench under the banksia hedge.

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But Charlie Montcalm roused from his abstraction then, and helped to clear away the supper dishes, then taking the pan of hot water away from Bertha, washed up cups, saucers, bowls, and plates as deftly as a woman might have done, while Dodge looked on in amazement to think that a visitor should trouble to do housework unless positively compelled.

But the visitor in this case seemed to very much enjoy his self-appointed task, making so merry over it that even Joyce and Bertha were beguiled from their sadness, and had to laugh too.

It was afterwards, when the house was shut up and silent, the girls and Dodge having gone to bed, with Bruno and the puppies as a guard of defence, that Charlie Montcalm's thoughtful mood returned upon him with redoubled force.

He was to share the sleeping-quarters of Sparkin for the night, and as they turned in the talk of the two men turned naturally on the disappearance of Tom and Ellie.

"I met a man east of Cadwallader, and he told me that a party of cannibal natives from beyond Shark's Bay had been travelling about the district, collecting prisoners for a great war

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feast. I hope it is not true," the young man said, in a troubled tone.

Sparkin shivered. "I heard the same myself to-day, and it turned me sick," he answered. "For pity's sake don't drop a word about it at the house!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE MUD-TAILED CORROBOREE

THERE was always an air of bustle and prosperity about Geraldtown; it was the seaport for the copper and lead mines of the district, while great shipments of wool, timber, and corn were sent away annually.

Although growing fast in size and importance, it was still a small place with few imposing buildings. There were a custom-house, a court-house, a gaol, and the residency, which, being government houses, were built of stone and better finished than the ordinary dwelling-houses of the town.

Two big hotels, neither of them in a state of completion, a school-house, and a hundred or so of other houses of varying sizes, shapes, and materials made up the town.

At one of the hotels Mr. Paynter was keeping his bed in a room on the ground floor which had no door. He had been carried in there at the

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time of his accident, and had stayed there ever since.

At first the fowls used to come and walk about his chamber at pleasure, then one day an enterprising pig walked into the sick-room to see if there was anything eatable which was likely to spoil by keeping. After this intrusion the proprietor of the hotel brought a piece of corrugated iron and leaned it in front of the aperture to serve as a door, so that wandering live stock could not effect an entrance.

When Mrs. Paynter arrived at the hotel to nurse her husband, she soon put a different complexion on things, making the comfortless unfurnished room into a veritable home for the time being. The men who were staying at the hotel, because they had no other place to sleep and eat, used to tell Mr. Paynter that he was more to be envied than pitied, because now that his wife had come he looked so comfortable and well-cared for.

A number of them liked to come in for an hour after supper, to talk to the invalid and enjoy the home atmosphere which Mrs. Paynter contrived to give to the sick chamber, and so it came to be a recognized rule that from eight

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o'clock to nine, every one who liked to come was heartily welcome.

They were men of many trades who gathered at those informal evening receptions. Some of them were squatters from the surrounding districts, or bushmen in town for a brief holiday ; there were cattle men and sailors, pearlers from beyond Shark's Bay, and men employed in the horse-shipping trade.

One evening a man who had been working with a squatter, right away up in the district round Lake Flora, came in with a friend in the pearling business, and soon began to tell of his experiences while working in that wild, unsettled district.

"The niggers were the worst part of the business," said this man, Tom Logan. "The snakes were pretty numerous and turned up in all sorts of unexpected places, but you know what to expect from a snake, and can prepare for it. The niggers you could never be sure of, and of all that I ever saw, the mud-tailed tribe were the worst."

"I don't think that I have ever heard of the mud-tailed natives ; what are they like ?" asked Mrs. Paynter, with interest.

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"Oh, they are about like the rest of the natives, except that they are lower and more bestial in every way, very much given to cannibalism, and wear their hair in a long tail like a Chinaman's, only keeping it well plastered with mud, hence the name."

"I am very glad we do not have that sort of native at Woolla; ours are bad enough—lazy, dirty, thievish, but they do not appear particularly vicious," the lady said, with a shrug of her shoulders, as she picked up a fan and commenced to swing it briskly to give her patient more air, for the night was hot and the number of visitors larger than usual.

"I'm afraid you will have them in your district though, and that before you get back to Woolla," Tom Logan answered, as he settled himself more comfortably on the starch-box which had been apportioned him as his seat. Some of the men were sitting on buckets turned upside down, and the starch-box had been given to Tom because he happened to be the greatest stranger present.

"How do you know?" demanded Mrs. Paynter, and now there was a creeping note of anxiety in her tone, as she thought of the big

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family at Woolla, and wondered if Joyce and Stevie were getting on all right. But Charlie Montcalm had started for Cadwallader three days ago ; when he came back she would hear all about the home-doings.

"Because just before I started to come south the mud-tailed lot had a corroboree, that is a sort of war dance you know. All the men had got themselves up in fresh mud-plastered tails, with streaks of paint across their faces to make themselves as hideous as possible, although that was very unnecessary, seeing how ugly they were before. Then they danced until they were all downright exhausted. My boss and I saw a part of the performance, and one old man, too old to dance, told us that in a day or two all the dancers would split up into small companies and go out to scour the country. If they came on any weak parties of blacks, then they would fight them, kill, then eat them, in order to make themselves strong for battles of a bigger sort."

"What a horrible story !" exclaimed Mrs. Paynter, with a catch in her breath.

"All the time they confine themselves to eating black flesh, I think it isn't so bad. The

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trouble will be if they get a taste for white people," said a quiet man, who was sitting on a bucket near the foot of the bed.

"Oh, the authorities would step in there. Of that you may be quite sure," put in a nervous-looking man, who was dressed like a sailor.

"They might, certainly, but that would not be until after something bad had happened," replied Tom Logan,

Then the talk drifted on to other matters, and did not touch again on the subject of the mud-tailed corroboree until nine o'clock struck, and Mrs. Paynter turned them all out of the room so that her husband might get quiet for the night.

"I shall get up and have my clothes on to-morrow, then by early in next week we will start for home," said Mr. Paynter, when his wife had shut the door on the last of the visitors.

"Yes, dear, it will be a great comfort to get to Woolla again, and to know that the children are all right," Mrs. Paynter said, with a wistful sigh, as she thought of her children, and although she said no more about it, one may feel fairly certain that her thoughts often hovered about that horrible story of Tom Logan's, while

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she waited with keen anxiety for Charlie Montcalm's return.

It was five days later before he came back, by which time Mr. Paynter was up and walking about, although with a decided limp.

Mrs. Paynter did not know that the young man had returned until she saw him walking in at the hotel door, and then she cried out in dismay, for something in his honest, boyish face warned her that the tidings were evil, which he had come to tell.

"Charlie, something is wrong; what is it?" she demanded, walking up to him and laying a shaking hand on his arm.

"It may be all right by this time, Mrs. Paynter; anyhow, don't look so distressed, or I shall not be able to get through with what I have to tell," he said, in an imploring tone.

"Make haste about it please, I am all right," she said faintly, but looking so white and drawn that he feared she was going to faint.

He told her then the strange story of the disappearance of Ellie and Tom, who had gone off with a violin and a French horn, none knew whither; and then in a lower and more hesitating key, said how, just before he himself had

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left Woolla, Pearce had come back, sent by Stevie, to tell of the boot-marks found beside the naked footprints on the edge of the water-hole.

"Oh, my children! They have been stolen away by the mud-tailed," moaned the stricken mother, and no one had words with which to comfort her, because every one feared the worst.

The little group of sympathizing friends and acquaintances, who had been present when Charlie Montcalm told his bad news, were still gathered in an excited group in front of the hotel, talking the matter over from every possible point of view, though Charlie had gone with Mrs. Paynter to break the tidings to the convalescent invalid.

Then sweeping along the dusty main street of the town came a mob of some fifty driven horses, splendid prancing creatures they were, that snorted, pranced, and kicked from sheer strength and good spirits.

The mob were in charge of two men, and were being brought down to the port for shipment. The younger of the two drovers, who had bushy whiskers and wore tinted spectacles, rode up to the group by the hotel door, and

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asked in a rather swaggering tone what was the matter.

They told him in a half-incoherent fashion, two or three speaking at once, for the feelings of all had been wrought up to a high pitch of indignation by Charlie Montcalm's story, and there was not a man among them, loafers and lazy although some of them were, who would not have volunteered there and then to go off in search of the missing children, had they been asked to do so.

"Who did you say the youngsters belonged to?" asked the stranger, with a nervous movement of his hand to his face, as if to readjust his tinted spectacles.

"Mr. Paynter, of Woolla. It's a mixed run, about two hundred miles north from here. Paynter himself had a nasty accident, and we sent for his wife to come and nurse him, so she is here too, as nice and kind-hearted a woman as is to be found between here and the North Pole," said the proprietor of the hotel, turning to the stranger and making the situation as plain as he could.

"Aye, that she is!" exclaimed the newcomer.

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"Do you know her then?" demanded the proprietor, in a great state of amazement.

The man with the whiskers laughed in a mirthless, strained fashion.

"Do you think that women like Mrs. Paynter, of Woolla, are so plentiful on this side of Australia that one has to be next neighbour or first cousin to know them?"

"Well! women of any sort are scarce enough in the colony, if it comes to that," said the hotel-keeper, with a disappointed air. He had hoped that the man with the whiskers was going to turn out to be some influential friend of the Paynters, who might have money or time to help them in their present trouble.

"Just what I meant," remarked the stranger, calmly. "But where is the chap that brought the news down from Woolla, and what is his name?"

"Charlie Montcalm? Oh, he's from here, and had only gone up Woolla way on business; a good-natured sort of boy he is, only too ready to help other people to get on very fast himself," replied the hotel-keeper.

"I've never heard his name before," said the whiskered one, with another movement of his hand towards his glasses.

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"That is very likely, but he's been knocking about all the same over in Tasmania."

"Tasmania? That accounts for my not knowing him," the stranger said, with something like relief in his tones. "Well, will you ask him if he will be so kind as to step down to Jackson's wharf in an hour from now, when it is just possible he may hear of something very much to his advantage."

"Right you are stranger, I'll tell him," said the other, then stood watching with considerable mystification in his face, as the man with the whiskers rode away down the street after the mob of horses, which had already disappeared in the direction of the wharf.

"Now, where have I seen that man before?" drawled Tom Logan, in a puzzled tone, coming to stand by the side of the hotel-keeper.

"That is what I have been asking myself, but as there seems no answer to it, I reckon I had better leave it alone," that worthy said, turning into the hotel to give Charlie Montcalm the message left for him by the stranger.

It was nearer two hours than one before Charlie appeared at Jackson's wharf, to find the whiskered stranger impatiently waiting for

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him. Then their interview was long and private, after which Charlie went off to the place where he lodged, with a look of set determination on his face, but utterly refusing to say a word to any one about his long talk to the stranger.

The next morning very early a letter was brought to Mrs. Paynter at the hotel. She had just risen after a sleepless night, and was making preparations to ride with her husband on the first stage towards Woolla that day. Opening the letter without much interest, she glanced through its contents, then uttered a cry of mingled surprise and delight.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Paynter, languidly.

"Listen!" she exclaimed, with a catch in her voice. "Why, George, it is just like the hand of Divine Providence:—

" 'DEAR MADAM,

" 'Since one good turn deserves another, I am just starting off, with Charlie Montcalm for a helper, to find your children, and we'll do it too or perish in the attempt, so don't worry about them more than you can help.

" 'JIMMY'S FATHER.' "

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"I wonder who the man is?" Mr. Paynter said.

"He cannot be a real cattle-duffer, or he would not have such a kind heart," she answered through her tears.

CHAPTER XIV

FOILED

WHEN Stevie and Bert Tuckwell rode forward with the two neighbours in pursuit of Mr. Knutsford and the black-tracker, although they made all possible haste they could not overtake them before darkness fell, and were forced to camp when sundown caught them, because they could no longer follow the tracks of the two who had gone before.

Worn out and miserable, Stevie could scarcely utter a word when at last they stopped for the night.

There was no water, but plenty of grass all around them, and as the horses had drunk their fill two hours before when they passed a deep water-hole in a stony valley, this absence of water at the camping-place did not matter.

Bert Tuckwell made a fire, and emptying

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the contents of his water-bottle into a tin billy, set it on the coals to boil, and made some tea, hot, strong, and sweet, which revived them all not a little, though nothing could lift poor Stevie's black cloud of depression. When the others had all gone to sleep, he lay wakeful and wretched, thinking of those small boot-marks side by side with the naked footprints on the sand. If only Biboo had been on hand to take up the trail then, the children might have been tracked down in a few hours perhaps, and delivered out of the hands of their black captors. But now, every hour added to the difficulty of the task.

About midnight it began to rain. Not a pleasing gentle shower, such as are common in our more favoured England in early summer, but a blinding, pelting deluge, which wetted every sleeper through in about two minutes, and forced them all to stand erect if they would not be drowned as they lay.

"The tracks will all be washed out by this rain," groaned Stevie, with misery in his tone.

"Yes, yes, that may be so, laddie, but black-trackers are so clever that they can do almost anything," said the elder of the two

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neighbours, a kindly man whose heart ached for the boy who had stuck to the search so pluckily in spite of numberless disappointments.

"Biboo is reckoned the cleverest tracker anywhere about this district," Bert Tuckwell said, as if to confirm the statement of the other, and then no more talk was possible because of the ceaseless whirl and swish of the rain as it fell.

For four hours the flood came down, then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun, a brisk cold wind sprang up, moaning over the grassy solitudes and through the groves of black wattle and the acacia trees which climbed the hillsides.

Now that the rain had ceased, every one was moving to and fro, trying to get a little warmth into their chilled limbs by active exertion, but it was not until the sun came up that anything like comfort could be hoped for.

The rain, however, was so welcome, spelling as it did the difference between scarcity and plenty, that no one had the heart to grumble about it except Stevie, and he was too worn out and miserable to have many words to spare for anything.

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The necessity to still go forward, until Mr. Knutsford and the tracker were overtaken, made Stevie very wretched, but as there was plainly nothing else to be done, the party started as soon as possible, satisfying their hunger with sodden bread, "soaked damper," they called it, and made the best of the sorry meal by telling each other that at least no one could complain of the hardness or dryness of the fare. A drink of hot tea would have been an unspeakable comfort, but there was no fire and no dry wood to make one; moreover no one wanted to linger, while so much depended on their getting forward.

By noon they met Mr. Knutsford and the black-tracker returning, the faces of both wearing a disappointed expression.

They had overtaken the blacks who had been camping on the edge of the cultivated grounds at Woolla, only to find the poor creatures in a panic and still in flight from a terror, which to them was all the more dreadful because they did not know what it was. These people told Mr. Knutsford that they had been roused from sleep on the night of their flight by the most fearful noise, and springing up, the men

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had rushed out and attacked each other, under the impression in the dense darkness that every one they encountered was a bloodthirsty foe. Then the noise continuing, they had just dropped their spears and fled, intent only on escaping with their lives beyond the direful noise, which could only have been made by a Joono of the swamp. They had seen nothing of any white children nor had they encountered any other natives; but never, never as long as they should live, would they venture again in the neighbourhood of Woolla, through fear lest again they should hear the wailing Joonos.

Not a word did Mr. Knutsford say in explanation of the mysterious noise, and this for two reasons. It was as well that the blacks should be frightened away from their old camp so near to the cultivated grounds, where they were always very much of a nuisance, and he was anxious they should not know that they had been frightened by a trick, because he feared lest some idea of revenge should enter their heads, if they discovered that their supposed Joonos were merely a pair of daring children, armed with an old violin and a French horn.

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"So we have tracked all this way for nothing," said Mr. Knutsford, who had gloom writ large all over his kindly face.

"Not quite," replied Stevie, then told of the boot-marks beside the naked footprints, which he and Bert had found by the edge of the pool.

It was decided to return to this place as fast as the horses would carry them, so that Biboo could start tracking again from this fresh clue.

But when the spot was reached they found to their dismay that what had formerly been only a chain of little pools was now a wide river with a swift current, while the banks on either side were so trampled by mobs of wild horses that it was impossible to find reliable tracks of any kind, though a whole day was spent in hunting up and down for two or three miles on either side.

After this the whole party returned to Woolla, worn out, half-starved through provisions running short, and despairing of finding any clue to what had really become of Ellie and Tom.

Stevie could not rest at home, however ; the

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children must be somewhere, he argued, and they could be found if one only searched long enough. So getting Mr. Knutsford to let him have the loan of Biboo for three weeks or a month, if necessary, he set about preparing for a much longer sojourn in the wild unsettled region beyond where the boot-marks had been found. A pack-horse must be taken on this second expedition, to carry food supplies, and Stevie hoped that by wandering hither and thither they might finally pick up some clue which would enable them to track down the missing pair.

All this was settled during the ride back to Woolla, Mr. Knutsford highly applauding the scheme. He even offered to accompany the party, but this Stevie would not hear of, knowing well how badly Mr. Knutsford's own business affairs must be needing him at Shirley, in that busiest season of the year.

The neighbours who had so kindly given their assistance in the first search, were also compelled to turn their attention to their own affairs; but Bert Tuckwell, who considered himself a free man for the time, because the store had been burnt down and his brother

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had not come back to begin building another, declared his intention of going with Stevie and Biboo.

"I'll see the thing through, even if it takes six months," he said, with an air of easy determination.

"It is very good of you, but what will your brother say, do you expect?" Stevie asked, with considerable concern in his tone. He knew that he would be tremendously thankful for Bert's help and companionship, and, like the other, he was determined to stick at the searching, even if it took six months to find the children.

"Sam can say what he likes. I shan't be there to hear when he says it, so there will be no danger of my feelings being ruffled you know," laughed Bert. "Besides, if Sam had not gone off hunting down those cattle-duffers, they would not have troubled to round on him by burning the store, and I should still have been slaving at serving out flour, bacon, and molasses. But seeing I've got a holiday, I am going to spend it in my own way. You are not obliged to feel indebted to me either, for the truth is I am glad of a chance to prospect a

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little in that back country, so my offer to go with you is not so disinterested as you may think."

Stevie shook his head at this, but would not trust himself to speak. He had a great horror of breaking down, and the long journey, the scanty food, and the bitter disappointment had brought him very near to the verge of actual tears.

The neighbours had dropped out at Bitter Spring, ten miles from Woolla, taking a cross-country track to their own place, and when the others reached the deep gully, where a post road was being made through to Wellesley Hill, Mr. Knutsford also turned off, saying that he could save six or eight miles on his road home, by keeping to the high ground and crossing the northern spur of the range of hills, instead of going on to Woolla.

"But you are as hungry as the rest of us, and you will make up for the longer round by coming home and having a feed," Stevie said, in consternation at the thought of such a kindly helper going his way unrefreshed.

"I shall be sure to pass a shepherd's hut between here and Shirley, or, failing that, I can

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turn aside to Howland's place for a bit of damper and a billy of tea," Mr. Knutsford answered, and was not to be turned from his purpose.

If he could have done anything more for the stricken family at Woolla, he would have gone forward with Stevie, thankful that he could be of use. As it was, he simply could not face Joyce and Bertha, and so was glad to ride away, worn out and hungry though he was, leaving to the others the task of telling the news which was not good.

Stevie and Bert were riding side by side; while Biboo was a little in front, his keen eyes searching from side to side from sheer force of habit, when they rode through the cultivated grounds at Woolla.

Bert, who was an adept at that kind of thing, sent out his voice in a shrill, long-drawn coo-ee-e, to announce their coming, and was promptly answered by Dodge, who appeared to have been on the look-out for their coming.

They could see him crossing the paddock as fast as his short legs could bring him, waving his arms in wild gesticulation.

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"Poor little chap!" groaned Stevie. "He thinks we have got good news, and is running to hear it."

"It looks more as if he had something to tell us," remarked Bert. "Besides, he can guess that we have nothing very good to tell or we should have the children with us."

Stevie grunted but said nothing further, being just then too miserable for words.

"We've got some——" panted Dodge, but the last word was lost in a big gasp.

"What does he say?" cried Stevie, turning to Bert, while Biboo, who was in front tried to urge on his tired horse.

Bert shook his head and forced his horse to a canter, while Dodge, apparently realizing the uselessness of running, stood still and shouted jerkily—

"We thought you never were coming back—and we've wanted you fearfully—we've got some news!"

"News of the children?" asked Stevie, who by this time had reached the side of the panting small boy.

"Yes," replied Dodge, with a wag of his

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head, and so bursting with the news he had to tell that he was incoherent, because he wanted to say it all in a breath. "We've had a letter—I found it—leastways it wasn't a letter at all—only just a black cockatoo!"

CHAPTER XV

THE BLACK COCKATOO

WITH the absence of so many people from the station, and the general depression of the slow, sad days of waiting for news, Dodge found the time hang very heavy on his hands.

True, the duties of nursemaid had descended permanently upon him, but he was quick to discover that the best way to amuse a baby is to let it do exactly as it likes, and acting on this principle found the work not so hard, while even the baby was better than no companion at all.

When Jimmy, in a clean frock and pinafore, wanted to roll in dust and sand, Dodge cheerfully allowed him to do so. Or when the baby seeing a bucket of water standing unguarded, would, with gurgles of delight, make for it on all fours like a frog, Dodge never interfered

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to check the performance, which mostly ended in Jimmy overturning the bucket and getting an impromptu bath.

Having a lot of spare time, which hung heavily on his hands, Dodge set to work snaring cockatoos, after a fashion taught him by Tom, who had in his turn learned it from Booja.

The cockatoos were at this season of the year a great and constant menace to garden and field, so that the task of thinning them out a little was really a work of necessity.

Dodge's method of going to work was simplicity itself. Getting a lot of manna-gum, which could be obtained in great abundance from the numberless acacia trees growing on the station, he spread it on bits of board and in small open boxes, scattering corn on this gummy surface. He put the boards and boxes in places frequented by these feathered thieves, then hiding under cover near at hand, with Bruno or one of the puppies, awaited developments.

The cockatoos descended in flocks for the corn, but getting the gum on their head feathers tried to rub it off, with the result that the feathers got plastered over their eyes so that they could see nothing, and in their blind scurry

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to and fro, were easily despatched by the dog in waiting.

Mr. Paynter always gave the children a small sum per dozen for all cockatoos destroyed, and Dodge worked on steadily day after day, thinking what a nice lot of pocket money he would have when his father came home, for already the toll of the slain mounted to over three hundred.

Even to Dodge, who was not sentimental, it seemed a great pity to kill the pretty birds with their lovely plumage, and he would stroke the ruffled plumage of the dead creatures, wishing that they were ugly or that his heart were a little harder, so that he did not have to suffer himself in this task of wholesale destruction.

But oh, the ruin they wrought to the growing crops! In fact, there would have been no crops at all if the cockatoos could have had it all their own way. In ordinary years some one walked about the whole day through with a gun, but with such a small number of workers as were on the station at this time it was quite impossible for any one to be spared, until Bertha, armed with an old shot-gun of her father's, came

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out to help Dodge in driving away the battalions of feathered foes, which swooped down upon Woolla in numbers which seemed to increase with every day that passed.

There were white and yellow cockatoos, and some white and rose ; others were brilliant rose colour, with grey wings and tail. There were also red and black, black and white, white birds with sulphur crests, and black ones by the hundred.

Bertha was quite as much averse to slaughter as Dodge, but the stern necessity made her equal to the occasion, and so she blazed away, becoming by dint of much practice quite an expert markswoman.

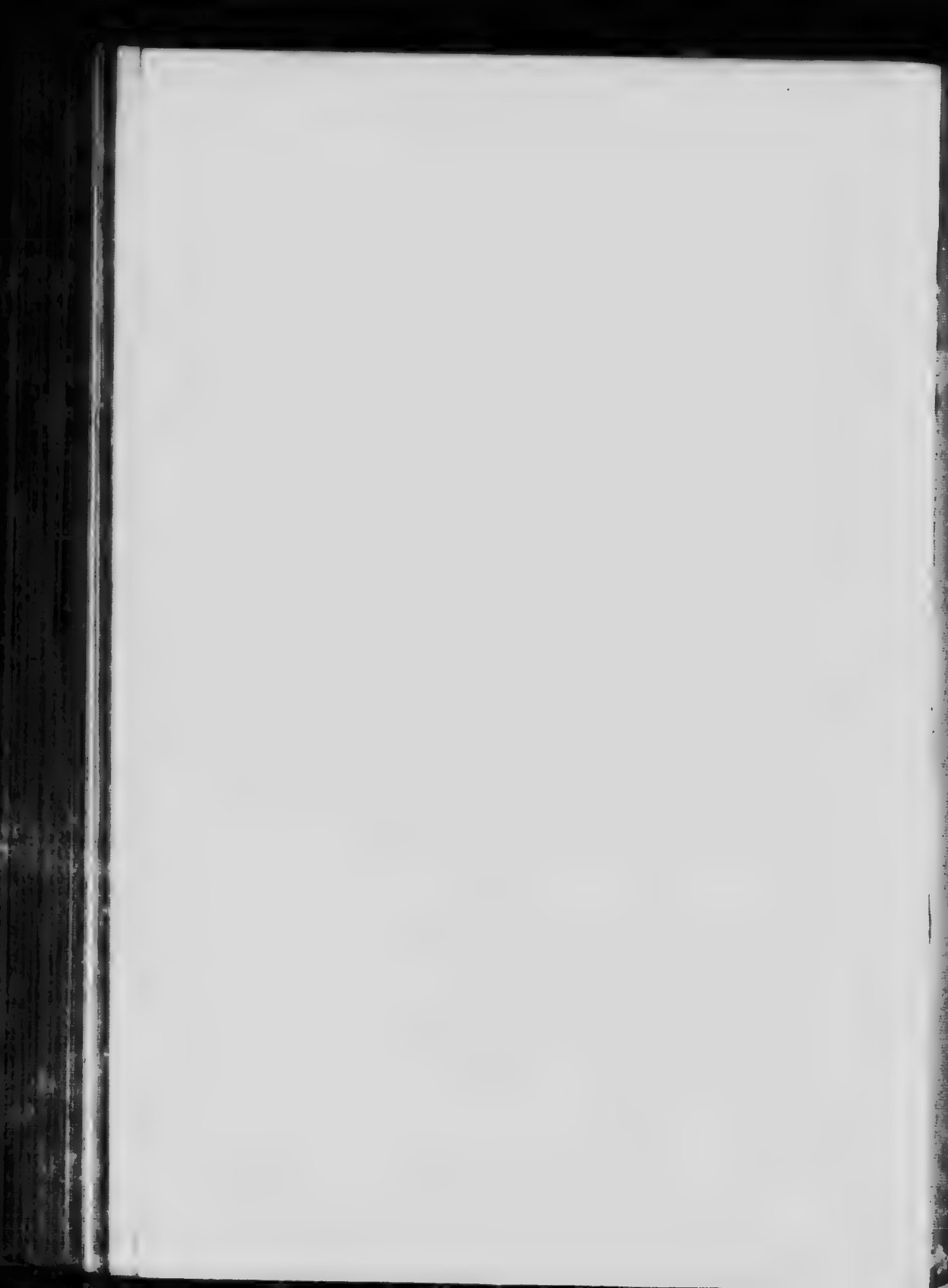
This arrangement left Joyce entirely alone to wrestle with the work indoors, but as Dodge took Jimmy out with him trapping, she just did the work that was absolutely necessary and let the rest go, which was the wisest course to pursue.

Dodge and Bertha changed ground every day, so the cockatoos driven away by her gun on one day were easily tempted by his baited boards and boxes on the next.

Two days before the one which saw the



BERTHA, ARMED WITH AN OLD SHOT-GUN, CAME OUT TO
HELP IN DRIVING AWAY THE FEATHERED FOES.



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return of Stevie, Dodge started off directly after breakfast with some gum in a pot and a small bag of corn stowed in the waggon with Jimmy, who was crowing and gurgling with delight in a fashion peculiar to himself.

Bertha, who started at the same time, helped to drag the waggon so far as their paths lay together, then she went off to that part of the cultivated grounds where Dodge had been busy yesterday, while he proceeded to set his snares where she had shot on the day before.

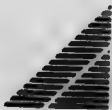
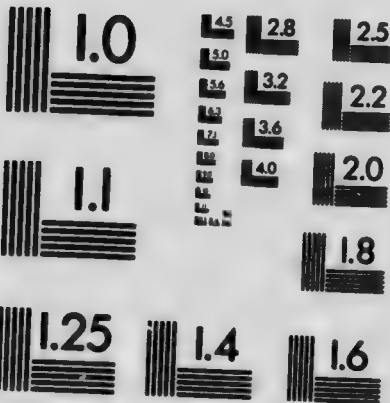
Sport was not so good to-day as it had been previously. The cockatoos were getting shy of gummy boards, or perhaps it was Bertha's gun which had scared them away, and Dodge, who was amusing himself down under the shadow of a patch of Indian corn by teaching Jimmy to walk, waited a long time before he heard the shrill shrieking which proclaimed the coming of the cockatoos in search of food.

He had Bruno with him to-day, and when just before noon the familiar sound was heard, the old dog crouched, then waited until the shrill scolding began, which proclaimed that the poor bird was being blinded by its own feathers.



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"After it, Bruno, good dog, seize it!" whispered Dodge eagerly, as he quivered all over with excitement, for there was always the danger of the struggling bird taking to flight, so getting beyond reach of the dog, although as a rule they did their blind struggling on the ground.

Bruno was out into the open like a shot from a gun, trotting back two minutes later with a black cockatoo to lay at the feet of Dodge.

"Only one! Things are downright slow to-day, and oh, I say, just isn't it warm!" exclaimed Dodge, talking to himself as much as to Jimmy or Bruno, since neither of those two could answer him.

"Yah!" cried Jimmy, who had been standing on his own two feet, clutching Dodge by the shoulder as the boy sat on the ground, but venturing to let go his hold tumbled over without delay.

But Dodge left him to pick himself up unaided, for he had caught sight of a whiteish-grey something, fastened under the wing of the black cockatoo, and hastened to examine into the matter.

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It was a big dry leaf, a light gray in colour, and so smooth and tough that the children always called this kind parchment leaves, and used them for writing upon in playtime. Dodge had done his very first letters on this natural writing-paper, and one glance at the leaf fastened under the bird's wing showed him that there was writing upon it.

A queer sensation went all over him, and although he had begun to unfasten the leaf, which was firmly bound to the wing with fine tough grass, he could not go on with it, but stuffing the dead bird in the front of his holland blouse and bundling Jimmy into the waggon, set off home as fast as he could go.

The day was so very hot, and the box on wheels in which the baby sat seemed very heavy to draw over the rough ground of the paddock, where the grass grew in hummocky lumps, very awkward for small wheels to surmount.

Bruno trailed on behind with a discontented air. It was the custom for Dodge to cut off the dead bird's head and toss the remainder to the dog. When there were twenty or thirty feathered bodies to be disposed of, it would have been different, but to-day Bruno had

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tasted nothing since licking out Jimmy's porridge plate at breakfast, and it did seem hard that Dodge should begrudge one skinny black cockatoo to a servant so faithful.

Perspiration was pouring in great drops down the small boy's face as he toiled across the unsheltered stretch of paddock ; and when at last he reached the shelter and coolness of the house, he panted so heavily that it was a minute or so before he could speak.

Joyce, who had been busy making bread in the cook-house, came to meet him with dismay on her face.

" Oh, Dodge, look at your blouse, and it was clean this morning ; what have you been doing, laddie ? "

Dodge looked down in consternation at the front of his blouse, where a dull red stain had been growing bigger all the way home from the cultivated ground, but he only shook his head in a vague way to intimate that he was not ready to talk yet.

Joyce misunderstood the action, and thought he was hurt, instantly jumping to the conclusion that it was his blood that had dyed the holland blouse to such a fearsome hue.

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"Dodge, darling, what is the matter. Oh, my brave little laddie, what has happened to you?" she cried, in great distress, sweeping him off his feet and sitting down on the veranda bench holding him closely in her arms.

"It ain't me, it's the cockatoo, and it's got a letter under its wing," said Dodge, finding his voice at last, and wriggling to free himself from his sister's embrace, in order to bring out the dead bird for her inspection.

"What do you mean?" asked Joyce, with a bewildered look on her face, as she watched what he was doing.

Lulled by the bumping across the paddock, Jimmy had fallen fast asleep and was slumbering placidly, while Bruno had departed on a tour of inspection to the cook-house, in the hope of finding a mutton bone, or something else to satisfy the keen appetite that had been defrauded of the cockatoo.

"I snared this bird this morning; then, when Bruno killed it I found there was a parchment leaf *perplexed* to its wing, and there was writing on it, so I brought it home," Dodge said. He meant *affixed* to its wing, but not

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being able to remember the right word, had supplied its place with the only cue he could think of which had an *x* in it.

Joyce was too engrossed with the task of unfastening the leaf from the bird's wing to notice the wrong word and put it right. Her fingers were trembling so much, as all sorts of wild fancies came into her head concerning the possible drift of the message the dead bird had brought them. She thought of her father and mother in far away Geraldton, and of Stevie out hunting for the lost children, then reflected on the unlikelihood of a wild bird flying free, coming straight with a message as a carrier pigeon might have done.

The leaf was unrolled at last, and she saw that it was covered on both sides with writing done with a burnt stick. Some of it was clear enough, but here and there a word was rubbed out, or too faint to be understood. By dint of much peering and some guesswork, this was the message Joyce made out.

"We are camping where a tall pillar of rock stands on a hill without any trees; there is a

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water-hole one side and a salt spring the other. Please some one come and find us, for we are afraid.

"ELLIE AND TOM FROM WOOLLA."

"Dodge, Dodge, it is a message from the children, from Ellie and Tom!" cried Joyce, who was gasping with excitement.

"Of course: where else did you expect it to come from?" asked the little boy, trying to look as if he were not excited at all; then, unable to keep up appearances any longer, broke out in gusty sobs.

"Don't cry so, Dodgie, darling, don't," implored the worried elder sister, who was trying hard to think what must be done next.

"Do you know where the tall rock on the hill is?" asked Dodge, as he wiped his tears away with the sleeve of his blouse.

He was dreadfully ashamed of crying in public, even though the public consisted only of Joyce and the sleeping Jimm.

"I don't know, but perhaps some one else does. Run dear and cooey for Bertha to come

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home; the cockatoos must steal to-day, if they will. I want her to ride up to Bandicoot Gully to call Mr. Sparkin home. I must see if another search party can be got together at once.'

CHAPTER XVI

HARD TIMES

"ARE you hungry, Ellie?"

"Rather, Tom, are you?"

"Just dreadful. I could eat you, if you were a goose," and Tom's voice trailed off in a thin cackle of unmirthful laughter.

"Well, I'm not a goose, you see, so you will have to wait until daylight before you can get anything to eat. Come closer to me, then you will be warmer, and being hungry doesn't hurt so much when one is warm," Ellie said, stretching out her arm and drawing Tom to nestle closer to her in the warm sand in which they were lying.

The night had been very cloudy, but the fragment of a waning moon was lightening the black world a little now; it was getting colder, for dawn was not far away, and Tom was glad to curl closer to Ellie for the warmth which was to keep his hunger from hurting so badly.

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The two children were curled down under the sunny side of a big rock, where Ellie had scooped out a deep hole the day before. Behind them the hill rose steeply, and was crowned at the top with a tall slender shaft of rock which must be visible for many miles on every side.

The hill with the rock pillar was the only eminence for many miles, and stood in the centre of a vast treeless plain, which was for the most part waterless, except at the hill, where there was a big water-hole that had never been known to shrink. There was a salt spring, too, on the opposite side of the hill, at which Ellie had tried to drink on the evening of their arrival, only to be miserably disappointed.

Tom was silent so long that Ellie thought he had fallen asleep, but when he spoke again it was in a faint whisper, as if he were afraid of being overheard.

"Do you expect the blacks are all asleep, Ellie?"

"Yes, I should think so. Just listen to the noise they make in breathing. Ugh, what a horrid set they are!"

"Horrid!" assented Tom, with equal energy and vehemence. "What I can't understand

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is, how a lot of ruffians like this set of blacks came to be wandering round Woolla station in the middle of such a dark night."

"Perhaps they had come on purpose to steal children, and finding us wandering about took us instead of the little blacks they were looking for," Ellie whispered, with a catching sob.

"Serves us right for creeping away like that, and not telling any one what we were going to do," groaned Tom, whose self-reproach was even keener than his sister's, because the prank which had ended in such dire disaster for them both had been planned by him.

"I wonder if those cockatoos we snared will be found by anybody, or whether they will just go on flying and stealing until they die of old age?" Ellie said, in a dreary tone, for she was very homesick, and that was a pain harder to bear than Tom's hunger.

"I don't know. We have caught ten, haven't we, in the two days since we have been here. But then there are such thousands and thousands of cockatoos, that our ten might easily never get shot or snared."

"They would, if God meant them to," Ellie

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said softly, then immediately felt comforted as she thought of the great and wise Creator Who could take care of them even in this wilderness. Ever since she had been old enough to remember anything, she had been taught that God would take care of her, but she had never realized that it was actual fact until now, when there was no earthly help to lean upon.

Many thoughts had come into her head that night as she lay curled up in the sand. It was not easy to put them all into words, but she understood for the first time in her life that God was more than a name, that the Bible was more than a book, and somehow dimly behind it all she felt that if she cried to her Heavenly Father in her extremity, He would hear, and would answer her prayer.

After that a change came over her, and the dark outlook was brightened by hope, the first that had cheered her since they had been dragged away by the blacks, who had taken them captive on the night when they were running back to Woolla, after their weird performance on the ridge above the encampment.

Ellie shivered again as she thought of the horror of that capture. At first she and Tom

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had both supposed that the black figures, into whose arms they had literally rushed in their rapid retreat homewards, were some of the natives they had been trying to frighten away, and so believed that retribution had fallen swiftly upon them.

But these blacks appeared to be quite strange to civilized ways and white people's speech, seeming not to understand either what Ellie and Tom tried them with various fragments of dialect as spoken by Booja and the other blacks frequenting Woolla.

Although they could not or would not understand the speech of the children, these strange blacks made their intentions regarding their captives very plain by simply swinging the two on to their shoulders and marching off with them.

Tom had struggled valiantly, intent on effecting the rescue of Ellie and himself. But a cuff on the side of his head which made his senses reel, showed him the uselessness of such an attempt, and he was instantly quiet, saving his strength for a time when he might use it to some purpose.

Ellie was quite passive, being so limp with

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terror as to have no strength to move hand or foot.

There seemed to be no women, or gins as they were called, among the group of their captors, who were seven or eight men armed with spears, who crept forward through the night at a slow walk, as if uncertain of their route.

Ellie, in her stupor of fright, was not conscious of the way they were being taken; but Tom, who although younger, was not nearly so much frightened, peered about him, trying to remember the landmarks with a view to speedy escape and return.

But it was so dark, while with every hour that passed the clouds grew thicker until down came the rain in sheets, both children immediately getting wet through.

An hour of extreme discomfort followed, during which the men plodded on at the same steady pace and in utter silence. Just as dawn was beginning to break, they scrambled down the side of a deep gully, where, half hidden by a rank growth of creepers, was the narrow opening to a cave.

Indeed, there was a series of caves opening

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one into the other, the hill seeming to be nearly honey-combed with caverns little and big.

Here they found women and children, some of them captives like themselves, others the wives and children of the raiding blacks.

Tom and Ellie were looked upon with great curiosity by this crowd, who seemed not to have seen white children before, which was rather surprising, the country south of Woolla being fairly well settled with a white population, that is to say there was a white family living at about every twenty miles.

Seeing how closely the blacks little and big were clustering about Ellie, who seemed almost stupid with fright, Tom had a sudden inspiration, and lifting his French horn commenced making a fearful noise with it, which echoed and re-echoed through the caves, making a most alarming din.

Yells and howls of terror broke from the women and children, some of whom fell prostrate on the ground, while others scudded away to shelter like hunted bandicoots.

Upon seeing the effect of his performance on this very sensitive audience, Tom burst out laughing, then besought Ellie to try them with

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the fiddle. Into his shrewd little head had darted the idea that if only they could inspire the blacks with sufficient awe no harm would come to them.

At first Ellie seemed too dazed and stupid to understand what he said to her. But seeing that the blacks were picking themselves up from the ground, whilst others were creeping back from their hiding-places, Tom's tone grew more insistent.

"Ellie, you just *must* do it, or who can say what may happen to us!" he cried so urgently, and with such a quiver of entreaty in his voice, that she roused herself with a little shake, and picking up the violin made it wail in a weird fashion that produced an instant outcry again.

Tom answered her with his French horn, then both chimed in together with an appalling noise, until the poor terror-stricken blacks simply grovelled before them.

"There, I think they have had about enough for this time," Tom said at length; and Ellie thankfully ceased her ear-splitting performance, and sat wearily down on the ground with her back against a rock, for she was quite tired out with excitement and terror combined.

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Tom sat down beside her then, and finding that no one came near them, they presently fell fast asleep and slumbered on for hours.

After that, no one attempted to touch them or treat them otherwise than kindly, though they were captives still with little chance of relief. When the rain had ceased the whole party set forward, travelling northwards right into the wilderness, Ellie and Tom having to walk like the rest. Weary day followed weary day, and every night found them more tired and hopeless than the one before it.

At last they reached the water-hole by the tall rock pillar, and here the whole party settled down for a few days of rest, and to collect fresh supplies to fill the food bags. Opossums were very plentiful on the plain about the stone pillar, and many a hopping, agile creature did the swift hunting dogs of the natives run down. Frogs were also found in great abundance about the water-hole, while all the children of the party were set to work snaring cockatoos.

It was this employment which had suggested to Ellie the possibility of letting some white people know their whereabouts; so carefully writing a message with a burnt stick on a number

The Black Cockatoo

of parchment leaves, which she had gathered some days before, she gave half of them to Tom, and keeping the other half herself, tied a leaf under the wing of every bird she succeeded in snaring, then set it free again to fly away, and be snared or shot somewhere else, for all the settlers who had ground under cultivation were snaring or shooting cockatoos now, so that it seemed quite possible the message might reach some one who had a heart kind enough to help in succouring two helpless children caught in dire disaster.

But their supposed clumsiness in letting so many birds escape soon drew down on them the wrath of the gins, who plainly intimated that they would have to go short of food in consequence.

That was why Tom and Ellie had gone so hungry to bed in the sand on the previous night, and had awakened before the dawning to talk over the situation in whispers before the others awoke.

"I tell you what it is, Ellie, we must just make a bolt for it to-morrow, that is to-day, and see if we can't find our way home," Tom said, whispering the words under his breath, as if

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fearful lest some of the sleepers lying near might rouse and hear what he was saying, although, seeing that none of them understood civilized speech, this was not very likely.

"Oh, Tom, do you think we could?" cried Ellie, with a dry, choking sob.

"We can try, anyhow, and if we keep going south we must come to a settlement somewhere, even if we don't happen to hit on Woolla," he answered, with happy confidence, born of ignorance of the hardships which might have to be faced.

"What shall we do for food?" demanded Ellie, whom necessity had made severely practical.

"There are mostly frogs where there are water-holes," Tom said, with a yawn, adding a little viciously, "and I know how to catch them now."

"I can't bear eating frogs, they are so ugly," Ellie replied, shivering with disgust.

"They are better than hunger. I wish I had one now!" and Tom worked his jaws vigorously, as if in fancy he had a portion of roast frog even then between his teeth.

Ellie sighed; her heart was so heavy, poor child, that she could not take matters so easily

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as Tom, who never seemed frightened or upset about anything, unless indeed he failed to get enough to eat.

"But suppose one of our cockatoos found its way to somebody who came to look for us here, and we had already gone, what would happen then?"

"Oh, we might fall in with them, and in any case they wouldn't find us here unless they came to-morrow," he answered.

"How do you know?" she asked, in a sudden flutter.

"I heard two of the gins quarrelling—that one who sometimes talks Booja's dialect and another—and I made out from them that we were all to set off again after one more day of hunting," he answered.

"That settles it then," she said, drawing a long breath. "We will steal away to-morrow whatever happens to us, for the further we go away from home, the further we shall have to come back."

CHAPTER XVII

THE ESCAPE

IT was one thing to lie awake in the darkness planning an escape in whispers, but it was quite another thing when daylight came to put those same plans into execution.

As on the previous mornings, all the younger part of the encampment were sent out searching for birds, frogs, or anything else which was edible from a native point of view; the men, armed with spears and attended by the dogs, were away after opossums, while the hard-worked gins were busy on their own account, getting the food bags stuffed with all sorts of unpleasant-looking stores, which would serve to fend off starvation in the marches ahead of them.

There were only two babies with the party, poor, sickly, half-starved mites with wizened

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faces, which, when awake, were always whining and crying.

Wherever Ellie and Tom went that morning in search of something to snare, some of those other children of the camp went also, until at last it dawned upon the two that the others had been specially warned to keep them in view.

This was discouraging, and daunted their hopes considerably, though it in no way lessened their determination to get off somehow. Presently Tom was successful in finding a small bob-tailed iguana sunning itself on a flat boulder, a fearfully ugly creature but quite harmless, and despatching this with the aid of a black girl named Yarra, a captive like themselves, Tom carried his find in triumph off to the camp.

It so chanced that bob-tailed iguanas were reckoned as prime delicacies by the hard-worked gins, so Tom's contribution to the larder, or rather to the food bags, put them in a high good humour, and he was promptly despatched to find another if he could.

With a quiet word to Ellie, who was never far away from him, Tom wandered away, first due north of the stone pillar, which stood up such a prominent landmark in the wide plain. He

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was apparently searching for traces of another iguana, and appeared quite indifferent to anything else.

Ellie wandered after him, feeling very miserable. She could not talk to him much, or ask him why he was wandering in such an aimless fashion, because Yarra was always close by, and as she had somehow contrived to pick up a number of English words from hearing them talk, Ellie felt it necessary to be exceedingly careful when she was within earshot.

Presently Tom began to veer round towards the south, making a wide circuit of the stone pillar, where was the water-hole and the camp.

Then Yarra stopped suddenly and commenced to dig with great energy for the root of an ajigo plant, which is very good eating when cooked, being almost exactly like a yam.

This was the chance for which Tom had been looking, and swinging out his arm to Ellie, in token that she was to follow, he set off running as hard as he could go, dodging round big boulders and leaping small ones as if he were playing at hare-and-hounds, and only desired to be first in pursuit of the hare.

Ellie followed him like the wind, and as she

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was good at running, and not too much encumbered by her clothes, she soon caught up and kept easily by his side, while they darted in and out where the big boulders or rank-growing spinifex blocked their way.

But even lightly clad children cannot run very fast or very far on a loose, sandy soil in such blazing sunshine, and presently the two sank down quite exhausted, to rest for a few minutes under the cool side of a great rock fragment.

"Oh dear, I am so hot ; I feel as if my head would burst !" panted Ellie.

"I'm so thirsty, I wish there was a water-hole somewhere about, or that we had got a water-bottle with us," sighed Tom.

"We shall find some water when we reach the edge of the plain," Ellie answered, with a faint show of energy. "Meanwhile it is a great thing to have got clear away from every one so neatly. Even Yarra is left behind now, though she did stick to us so closely."

"Don't be too sure she is left behind," said Tom, who had a greater opinion of Yarra's cleverness than was held by Ellie. "We shall have to do a deal of dodging to throw her off the

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scent I can tell you, and I think we can't do better than be moving on, if you are a bit rested "

" Oh, I am ready," replied Ellie, springing to her feet, anxious to put as much distance as possible between herself and the encampment of blacks. Then she said meditatively, as they walked along at a brisk pace, " I am just dreadfully sorry for that poor Yarra; every one seems unkind to her, and it was only this morning that one of the gins was thrashing her bare shoulders with a stick from the fire. I saw afterwards that she had great marks on the flesh, where the burning stick had hurt her."

" I expect she had been stealing though; she is really quite a desperate little thief," said Tom, with a superior air.

" Poor little girl! I don't expect any one ever taught her it was wrong to steal," Ellie went on, with compassion in her tone. Yarra was decidedly bigger and stronger than she was herself, but the fact of her being so badly treated, had drawn the hearts of the white children to her.

" We have been taught it was wrong to steal, yet in spite of it, you went and stole old Sparkin's violin, and I took father's French

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horn," Tom said, with a rueful air, as if his conscience were upbraiding him.

Ellie gave an uneasy wriggle. "That wasn't stealing exactly, because we meant to put the things back, so it was only like borrowing them. We shall put them back, too, when we get home again; only now, of course, it will leak out that we took them."

Tom snorted in a derisive fashion. "I fancy it is all about the same thing. Yarra stole because she was hungry, knowing that she would catch it if she were found out. We stole because we wanted the things, and trusted to our cleverness in being able to put them back without being found out."

"Oh, Tom, you make me feel such a horridly mean creature!" cried Ellie, with tears springing to her eyes.

She had got Mr. Sparkin's violin securely fastened on her shoulders with a cord of plaited grass, and just then it seemed to her that the frail thing weighed as heavily as Sinbad's old man of the sea.

"I feel mean myself," retorted Tom, who was plainly in a penitent mood, "and I just don't know how I shall look Joyce and Stevie

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in the face when we get home ; for we promised mother that we would give them no trouble, and just think of how they must have been worried ! ”

“ I shall be so glad to get home again, that I never even think of whether they will be angry with us, and I do know that I would rather be doing punishment at home than wandering about in this dreadful misery,” said Ellie, with a dry sob catching at her throat. “ Besides, it was not our fault that those horrid blacks came along and caught us as we were running home.”

“ They would not have been able to catch us, if we had not been there to be caught,” Tom retorted gloomily.

The real state of the case was coming home to him now. Before this he had chosen to think of himself and Ellie as being very much to be pitied in having been stolen from their home, forced to make weary marches and made to suffer hunger and thirst. But if they had not done wrong in the first place, no harm could have come to them. It was this feeling of having done wrong which made him groan aloud.

“ What is the matter ? ” asked Ellie.

“ We shall never get home, because we were

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so naughty," he said, with a break in his voice.

"I think we shall. I have asked Jesus to forgive us for being so bad, and to help us to get back to Woolla, so I don't feel so miserable now," she said.

"But that is only saying prayers," he replied despondently.

"It is more, it is meaning them, and when we mean what we ask for, Jesus Christ hears what we say," she nodded her head cheerfully as she spoke, encouraged by the belief in her heart.

"Let us sit down and rest," he said, in a desponding tone.

But this Ellie would not consent to their doing, and urged him forward as fast as they could walk, intent on getting as far away to the southward as possible before night descended upon them.

Both she and Tom knew that they would have to reach the edge of the plain before they came to water, and as the weary hours of that burning afternoon passed away, a fear came into the minds of both that they would not have strength to reach the water they wanted so badly.

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It was Tom who failed first. Sinking down under the shadow of a big rock boulder, he lay stretched out on the hot ground declaring that he could not walk another step, and that he should just die if he could not get water to quench his raging thirst.

Ellie crouched down beside him in great distress. There was no one whom she could call for help, and nowhere to go for the succour Tom needed so badly.

She could not even think of a prayer in that moment of dire need, only a bit of a hymn which they used to sing on Sunday nights at Woolla, and which seemed curiously unsuited to the present occasion.

"Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm doth bind the restless wave,

O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea."

But out of place although the words seemed, they thrummed through her head so insistently that she found herself repeating them aloud, as she knelt beside Tom, crying bitterly.

"You gib it um some little out o' mine bottle ; um git up all stiff then."

The voice sounded so close behind her that

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Ellie jumped up with a little shriek of fright, to find Yarra close behind her.

"How did you find us out?" panted Ellie in terror, expecting nothing less than to find the whole encampment just coming in pursuit.

With a gay toss of her tousled head, Yarra, in her broken English and mongrel dialect, declared that she had never lost sight of them, but had only followed behind, because she thought they did not desire her company, which was quite true.

Then she knelt down beside Tom, and administered some of the contents of the water-bottle, the fluid, although lukewarm and rather nasty, acting like a charm on the poor boy, who was suffering so sorely from thirst.

Afterwards Ellie had a drink, grimacing a little, but it does not do to be particular when one is thirsty. Yarra had a drink herself, but only a small one, for the supply was limited, and she knew better than the other two how far they might have to go before getting any more.

Fumbling in her only garment, which had started its career as a man's red flannel shirt, and was very ragged and very dirty also, Yarra

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produced three cindery lumps which proved to be three roasted frogs, probably a part of the loot for which she had been beaten on her bare shoulders with the burning stick.

"Ums eat, then make haste, reach water-hole afore sundown," she said, stuffing one unsavoury-looking lump into Ellie's hand and passing another to Tom, but keeping the smallest and most burnt for herself.

Her kindness touched them both, and a blessed sense of protection stole into Ellie's heart. Her prayer had not been a bit like it should have been, yet God in heaven must have known what she meant to say, and sent Yarra to their help.

"Tom, God must have sent Yarra to help us. I asked Him, you know, and He heard my prayer," she said, creeping closer to her brother with a smile breaking over her sad little face.

"God doesn't hear bad people, only good ones," answered the boy wearily. "And just think how bad we've been in stealing away like that in the night."

For a moment Ellie looked downcast, then the hope in her heart triumphed over her fears, and she said brightly, "I think God hears bad

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people when they want to be good, and you know we are both dreadfully sorry, because of what we did in stealing away like that. We both want to do better next time, don't we ? ”

“ Yes, I'm sure I do,” admitted Tom, with a sigh.

“ So do I, and I told Jesus so in the night, when I meant my prayers ; that is why He sent Yarra to help us. Now I'm going to ask her to come with us.”

Getting on to her feet, but rather unsteadily for she felt queer and weak, Ellie put two loving arms round the little black girl, who perhaps had never experienced a caress before, then said in trembling tones, “ We don't want to go back to the camp, Yarra, we want to go home to our own dear home ; will you help us ? ”

Yarra's tousled head wagged briskly to and fro, as she laughed gleefully, then executed a sort of war-dance of delight.

“ Ums, ums, go along ums too ! ” she chanted, circling round and round in a great state of excitement and delight ; then her small face clouded piteously, and swinging her hand out towards the rock pillar, which still showed clearly outlined against the heat haze, she said

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with a melancholy shake of her head, "They come catch ums and carry ums back."

"No, no, we will go fast and hide; they will never find us if we take care," said Ellie,

Then Yarra's joy broke out in another dance of delight; while Tom, who had been eating his frog with evident relish, declared himself quite rested enough to go forward again.

Having taken Yarra so far into their confidence, it seemed quite easy to trust her further still, and very soon they had told her all about the messages they had tied to the wings of the escaping cockatoos, and their hopes of falling in with a search party before many days were over.

Yarra nodded in high glee, declared that she had seen what they were doing, having watched them all the time. Then taking the post of leader, she tramped steadily onward, and by sundown they had reached the water-hole on the extreme edge of the plain, being many miles away from the camp by the stone pillar.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHERE YARRA LED

THE children must have lain down supperless to sleep that night, but for the energy and resourcefulness of the little black girl.

There were trees growing about this water-hole, for they, having reached the edge of the great plain, were approaching forest land again, and searching round the trunks for holes in the bark, Yarra thrust in her active brown hand, pulling out lumps of big wriggling caterpillars from every hole. Then kindling a fire in the native way, by rubbing two sticks together, she laid the lumps of caterpillars on the hot embers. When roasted these lumps looked, and tasted, like the yellow part of a hard-boiled egg, and with plenty of water from the water-hole the three children ate and drank until hunger and thirst were abundantly satisfied.

But when Ellie and Tom would have lain

Where Yarra Led

down to sleep by the edge of the supper fire, she would not hear of it, declaring that they would be found and taken captive again, as some search was sure to be made for them.

Almost too tired to stir, yet disposed to trust implicitly to her guidance, Ellie and Tom dragged wearily after Yarra, as she dodged in and out among the tree trunks, then skirting the plain to the westward for perhaps half a mile, shot round behind a big boulder, and declared that she had found the right place.

The sun was quite down now, and the darkness creeping over the plain seemed to cover them like a garment. Under the shelter of the big boulder, the sand was still warm, almost hot from the glare of the sun beating on it all day. In this they dug deep holes, and lying down, drew the warm sand over them for bedclothes, until little of them save their heads remained visible.

Then Ellie and Tom said their prayers, repeating them aloud to-night for the benefit of Yarra, who listened in wondering silence, but at their request repeated "Our Father" after them.

"What ums do it for?" she asked, when

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the prayers were finished. She had been quick to imitate the others in attitude, and had repeated the words after them with a parrot-like quickness of imitation.

"We always say our prayers," began Tom, in a rather shocked tone.

Yarra was the most complete heathen he had ever encountered, and he did not quite know how to explain to her.

But Ellie interposed, "We have got a great Friend Who lives up in the sky, and Who helps us when we are in trouble, if we ask Him. It was He Who sent us food and water to-night."

"I brought that," said Yarra, quickly.

"Yes, but our Friend that we call Father in heaven sent you. He spoke to you and told you to be sorry for poor white girl and boy, then you ran after them with the frogs and the water-bottle, so we kneel down to-night and say 'thank you' to Him," explained Ellie.

Yarra nodded, but her understanding was hardly capable of taking in the sense of Ellie's words. Anyway, she knew she had brought the water and the cooked frogs.

It was easy to go to sleep after that, and although they were lying unprotected out in

Where Yarra Led

the dark night, with prowling dingoes wandering round, it never occurred to them to be afraid.

Once, in the darkness of the night, Ellie, who had been dreaming of happy days at home, awoke with a start, thinking she heard steps and voices. Some faint sounds she did hear, but they died away in silence again, and a little star right above her twinkled with such a friendly light that she dropped into fresh slumber, dreamed more happy dreams, and never woke until morning dawned.

Yarra was flying about like the wild child she was, all the time Ellie and Tom were making a morning toilet by shaking the sand from their clothes and their shoes. Presently she came running back with a scared look on her face.

"Ums come along black dark night to seek, find, then walk right away back, not come near at all," she said, with a flourish of her small brown hands, helping out her faulty English with bits of dialect which made it very difficult to understand what she said.

Ellie and Tom followed her, when failing to make them understand, she beckoned them to come and see what it was that had so aroused her.

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What they saw were the footmarks of a number of men, perhaps four or five, who had passed close to their big rock boulder only on the other side, the prints of the naked feet showing hither and thither, as if the owners had been wandering in search of something. There were the marks of dogs' feet also, and Ellie shivered when Yarra exclaimed with great solemnity of manner, as she wagged her head to and fro—

"Ums come catch ums dark night, then ums no find and go way back home again."

It was clear now to both children that she meant the blacks had come looking for them in the night, but failing to find them had gone back again, although it was a mystery to both that the dogs should have passed so close to them without discovering their whereabouts.

"Ums must run, or ums catch us yet," announced Yarra, with great decision, and the children set off at once, going as yesterday in the guidance of the little black girl, who seemed to know by instinct which way to take, in order to avoid swampy places.

The going was much pleasanter to-day, for although the ground was broken and rocky, it

Where Yarra Led

was overgrown with acacia trees which made a pleasant shade.

Out in the open the heat was terrible, and the children were thankful they had left the sandy plain so far behind.

Yarra declared that a few miles further on they would strike a cart-track, and as a cart-track meant civilization, Ellie and Tom felt as if their troubles were within sight of being over.

With her usual sharpness, Yarra contrived to pounce on a turkey's nest with six eggs before the morning was more than three hours old. These they sucked from the shell uncooked, for the little black girl would not hear of a fire being lighted, through fear lest the smoke should betray them to their enemies.

The eggs, although not very nice, proved very sustaining, and the walking would have been very pleasant but for the flies, which settled on them in such numbers that it was almost impossible to brush them off, even by continual movement.

Yarra talked a great deal as she went along about something which sounded like the boss and a little white lubra, but neither Ellie nor Tom could make out what she really meant, so

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they set to work to improve her English, finding her such an apt scholar at repeating and remembering things that the long hours were beguiled, and the weary miles made shorter for the travel-worn feet in consequence.

Yarra would not let them sit down much to rest, not even when the day was at its hottest, so keeping under the shade of the trees as much as possible, the trio crept slowly forward, looking all the time for the cart-track, and speculating upon where it might lead them to, when at length they should happen to strike it.

Towards sundown Tom began to show signs of being very unwell, and they had to stop a good hour before daylight ended, because he could not walk a step further.

The forest was growing denser now, and the acacias had given place to thickets of wattle and snakewood trees. But although so shady and pleasant to walk in during the day, it was colder at night, because there was no warm sand to burrow in.

Tom shivered so much that Ellie and Yarra lay close to him, one on either side to keep warmth in him. Then he grew feverish, beginning to babble of life at Woolla, and to throw

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his arms about in a fashion which left the others but little chance of sleeping, while from being cold he became so burning hot that to Ellie it seemed as if his skin were on fire.

"Water, water!" he moaned so constantly that very soon the supply in Yarra's canvas water-bottle was exhausted, and no more could be had until morning, for the last water-hole they had passed yesterday was quite three miles away, and none of them knew whether there was a nearer place in which water could be found.

Towards morning Tom grew quieter and seemed to sleep, only moaning so much that Ellie gathered him closely in her arms, thinking that he was frightened because of the dark. She fell asleep herself after a time, for she was quite worn out with the long day of walking and the night of wakeful anxiety.

So soundly did she sleep that she failed to hear the sweet notes of the "break o' day boy" magpie, and did not rouse when Yarra got up and started off in quest of water.

Then some kangaroos came pounding along at a great pace, at something between a run and a jump, making Ellie start up in a great fright,

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because she thought the blacks were coming to take them captive again.

But if the kangaroos frightened her, she frightened them still more, and at the sight of the little girl jumping up so unexpectedly just as they were passing, the whole troop went with a rush, leaping, bobbing and bounding, until Ellie burst into a shout of merry laughter to see how ridiculous they looked.

Her laughing awoke Tom, who asked in a languid tone what the joke was about.

"Only some silly old kangaroos went past. I could not help laughing because they looked so funny, but I am sorry I woke you. Do you feel better this morning, Tom?" she asked, bending anxiously over him.

"I don't know," he answered feebly. "I'm so tired, and I want some drink."

"Yarra has gone to find some; she will soon be back now, I expect," Ellie said, with a happy faith in the little black girl's power to bring the needed supplies.

Tom wriggled a little impatiently, then dropped into a troubled sleep, moaning sometimes, and flinging his limbs about in a restless fashion.

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Ellie sat by his side, not daring to stir saving to brush off the flies, which already were beginning to be troublesome, although it was so early.

Tom awoke from time to time, always asking in a fretful tone for water, and always having to be denied. Then Ellie, sitting and straining her eyes in all directions for some sign of Yarra's return, caught sight of some small berries growing on a bush not far away, and recognizing them as similar to those growing about Woolla, crept away and gathered a handful, hoping they would assuage Tom's thirst.

She was thirsty herself and hungry too, for last night's supper had been of the scantiest, consisting indeed only of some uncooked ajigo root dug up by Yarra.

They had been afraid to have a fire, and good as the roots were when properly roasted amongst the glowing embers of a brisk fire, they were neither nice nor satisfying in a raw condition.

Would Yarra never come? Higher and higher mounted the sun, hotter and hotter grew the day, whilst the air seemed black with flies.

Tom ate the berries eagerly, then turned

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over to sleep again, bidding her in a drowsy tone go and get some more.

Up and down went Ellie, picking here a berry and there another, using her ragged old nat for a basket, because she had no other. When she had secured a store of the forest fruit for Tom, she gathered another little heap and put in the coolest place she could find for Yarra, then afterwards hunted for more for herself. A few days before she would have gathered for her own eating first, and afterwards shared with the others. But Yarra's unselfish generosity had taught her a lesson, and already she was trying to profit by it.

Dreadful forebodings seized her as the day wore on about the little black girl ; some harm must have come to her. Perhaps she had fallen into the water-hole and got drowned, or trodden on a poison snake and been bitten by it.

The water-hole which they had passed yesterday was such a small affair, that drowning in it would have been a work of difficulty, so Ellie fell back on the snake theory, and was making herself as miserable as possible when she heard the light pad pad of running naked

Where Yarra Led

feet, and in a moment Yarra bounded into sight, dropped the water-bottle into Ellie's outstretched hands, then flung herself panting and exhausted on the ground.

"Oh, you poor dear, where have you been?" cried Ellie in dismay, for Yarra's eyes were rolling and her face twitching as if she were going to have a fit.

"Ums had to run!" panted the black girl. Ums in her speech standing for so many things that it was hard to understand what it really was meant for.

"Did you run far?" asked Ellie.

Yarra promptly held her arms out wide to imply a long distance, then said with a pant of

—
Ums found the cart-track, only ums black fellow squatting on it, looking for ums to come."

"Oh, what shall we do?" cried Ellie, in dismay. But Yarra shook her head with decision saying—

"We ums must go another way."

CHAPTER XIX

JIMMY'S FATHER

A QUEERLY assorted pair were Charlie Montcalm and Jimmy's father. The former was a happy-go-lucky sort of boy with little ambition saving to do somebody a good turn and enjoy himself in the doing of it; he laughed at everything, and provided he could get enough food to satisfy his hunger, was never discontented. He had been in the colony for three months now, looking for work, yet seemed in no hurry to find that which he sought, being quite satisfied to do odd jobs which turned up, instead of settling down to regular work.

The older man was entirely different, and under his bushy whiskers—which Charlie at the first glance decided were false and worn only as a disguise—had a strong chin and a

Jimmy's Father

determined mouth. He was silent too, and disposed to be gloomy.

When Charlie came down to Jackson's wharf to interview this stranger, he had not the remotest idea of what was required of him, but merely supposed some one had work to offer him, and as his funds were just then in a very low condition, he went prepared to take any sort of work on pretty nearly any sort of terms.

"You are the man that brought Mrs. Paynter the news of her children being missing, I believe?" the whiskered stranger said, looking Charlie over from his curly top-knot down to his rather dilapidated boots.

"Yes, boss," replied Charlie, but without any cheerfulness, for certainly he was not proud of bringing bad news, although it had to be done when necessary, like many another unpleasant task.

"What are the Paynters to you?" asked the stranger, glowering at Charlie from under bushy eyebrows as if he would like to devour him.

"A few weeks ago I should have said they were strangers, but now, I think I may claim

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them as my friends," he answered modestly, yet with considerable satisfaction, for to him it seemed a great thing indeed to have a woman like Mrs. Paynter for his friend.

"Then I take it that you would be glad to do them a service if you could?" the other said brusquely.

"That's it," replied Charlie, without wasting words.

The stranger stood a minute looking on the ground as if in meditation, then he said slowly—

"It's like this. Mrs. Paynter did me a great service a little time ago, and I should like to show her that I'm not ungrateful. If, as folks suppose, the children have fallen into the hands of the mud-tailed blacks, their fate is as good as settled, unless they can be speedily rescued. I know a good deal of that lot, and twice have been stalked by them, once escaping only with my life. The best way that I can think of going to work is to ship horses, go to Port Gregory by sea, then strike inland across the flats and head the niggers off that way."

"Do I take it that you are going to rescue those children?" demanded Charlie Montcalm, in profound surprise.

Jimmy's Father

"I am going to try, certainly, but I shall want a partner; will you take the job? I'll find horses and provisions and pay you a pound a week while the job lasts, or a fiver down if we find the children, whichever is the greater amount. Do you take it?"

"Yes, boss," replied Charlie, without a moment's hesitation, for the prospect appealed to him from every point of view. He would have free food, which in that country was something to be thankful for, seeing the price of all except local products was tremendously high. Then there was nothing he liked better than adventure, so the trip would be pleasant as well as profitable, while the prospect of doing something to lessen Mrs. Paynter's misery was very pleasing to him.

"Very well then, we will start to-night. My responsibility with these horses ends when we have got them shipped, which will be about sundown, I reckon, then I shall be free for the next job. I'll thank you though to take good care not to let a word of this leak out. I will take my own time for sending a line to Mrs. Paynter, and it isn't the business of any one else that I know of."

The Black Cockatoo

"I'm agreeable," assented Charlie with ready cheerfulness, as indeed he assented to most things in that rough and tumble life of his. Then he jerked out a question which had been trembling on the tip of his tongue all through the interview—

"What am I to call you?"

"I'm not particular," replied the stranger, with a slow drawl. "One name is mostly as good as another to a man who hasn't got one of his own to be specially proud of, so think it over and make your choice, which when made please stick to, for I can't stand being Sam one day, Dick the next, and Tom or Jack the week after that."

"All right, Mr. Whiskers. I'll be sure to remember," retorted Charlie, with a ready laugh.

"Now, what impudence made you fix on that?" growled the stranger in no pleased tone; and for one quaking moment Charlie wondered if his imprudence might not cost him dear, until he caught a twinkle in the other's eye which might stand for amusement, since it was certainly not wrath.

"You left the choice to me, boss, so naturally

Jimmy's Father

I seized on the first that came into my head, but I'll be sure to stick to it never fear."

The stranger burst into a great laugh, being promptly joined by Charlie, who was never backward at merriment.

They parted very good friends indeed, Charlie going off to prepare for his journey, but taking exceedingly good care to keep away from the hotel where the Paynters were staying, through fear lest some hint of the stranger's plans might leak out.

Just an hour before sundown he went back to the wharf, carrying a bundle over his back and two revolvers in his belt. The men whom he encountered professed great interest in his doings, asking numberless questions as to what he was going to do next.

But Charlie put them off with a laugh, and went on, secretly much relieved when the wharf was reached, for reticence was not his strong point, and he knew it.

The mob of kicking, prancing horses were all on shipboard, and the vessel was already weighing anchor; but it was not in that boat Mr. Whiskers and Charlie were to make the voyage to Port Gregory.

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A small steam-tug bound for the pearling grounds was on the point of starting, and it was in her their passage was taken.

That night they steamed away from Gerald-town, and three days later were striking inland in a south-easterly direction, hoping to meet some parties of the mud-tailed blacks, making back for the district round Lake Flora, where mostly the gruesome feasts were held.

It was a mad chance, as both men knew, but under the circumstances the only thing to be done, since had they ridden all the way up from Geraldtown, they could not have hoped to overtake the parties of marauding blacks moving northward; but by getting in front, there was the bare possibility of a face to face encounter.

The first night they camped on the edge of a swamp, which simply swarmed with wild ducks and mosquitoes. They killed some ducks and roasted them for supper, then had to make a dense smother of reeds and river-grasses to prevent the myriads of mosquitoes from making a supper off them.

"I don't like so much smoke about; it tells tales," Mr. Whiskers said uneasily, speaking in

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a thick tone because he was so nearly choked with the pungent reek of the smother.

"Are you afraid of the blacks finding us?" asked Charlie, with a thrill running through him, then he peered at the wall of murky darkness hemming them in, and almost expected to see a hail of spears come hurtling out of the gloom.

"No, I'm not afraid of them, but I don't want them to know there are any white folks tracking round this way, or they may be scared into hiding what we want to find out," Mr. Whiskers answered, in a worried tone.

"I see. We are right in the heart of their country now, I suppose," Charlie said, then gave a start, as a bulrush bent slowly as if some one were pressing against it, then was relieved to see the shadowy outline of his horse come into view, the creatures having been hobbled to keep them from straying far from the camp.

"In the very heart of it. I was up here two years ago, and saw sights to make one shudder. Until that mud-tailed lot are wiped out or driven north beyond the great desert, there will be little hope of the country getting settled,

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and yet there is some of the finest sheepland one could wish for on the higher ground beyond these flats."

"Humph!" responded Charlie, with a windy sigh. "It would be too lonely to suit me. Fancy being fifty or seventy miles away from one's next-door neighbour!"

"There are worse things than solitude," retorted Mr. Whiskers, then looked so glum and sad that Charlie did not like to disturb him with any more conversation, but went to sleep instead.

The next day about noon, they came quite unexpectedly on a party of blacks encamped in a thicket of stringy barks, just on the further edge of the flats where the rising ground began.

There was no time to make a detour, so as to watch the camp from outside. They were right into the middle of it before they realized that there were any blacks about, and were fighting down the fierce dogs which sprang at the horses, as if about to devour them straight-away.

No men appeared to be about, only a number of gins most repulsively ugly, some of whom

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were getting wood ready for spear-making, while others were skinning a wallaby, which the dogs had apparently pulled down only very recently.

Mr. Whiskers noted the unusual number of children swarming about. There were very rarely many boys and girls about a camp of living blacks, the life was too hard for them,

and those who did not die from exposure to the drenching rains and scorching sunshine, were often victims of starvation or improper feeding. So he instantly decided that some of these children must be captives.

They were all natives, however, most of them with only their dirty mop of hair for a garment, but Charlie's quick eye noted that one active girl of about ten years old had a pink ribbon twisted round a tuft of her matted locks.

His heart gave a great bound at the sight, and he instantly called the attention of his companion to it. Mr. Whiskers immediately pretended that he wanted to buy the dirty fragment; but the child disappeared into the bush in all haste, the whole crowd of children scurrying to cover after her.

"Now what does that mean, I wonder?"

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said Mr. Whiskers, when having presented one of the gins with a little tea and sugar, he and Charlie rode forward again.

"It means that the pink ribbon was stolen from Ellie Paynter, I should say," Charlie answered.

"Then where is Ellie Paynter now, and her brother too? That is what I want to know," Mr. Whiskers said, looking more worried than before.

"There were no white children with that lot, plainly," said Charlie.

"No, that was evident. But where had the men gone to? They were not hunting, for all the dogs were about the camp. It looks queer, very queer."

"Perhaps the Paynter children have escaped, that is to say if they were with this lot, and the men have gone to look for them," suggested Charlie.

"It may be. As a matter of precaution, I think our best plan is to stalk those men, and keep an eye on the camp generally, then we may learn something of what we want to know," Mr. Whiskers replied.

But it soon became evident to the two men

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that it was the other party who meant to begin the stalking, as on climbing a bit of rising ground, they had a glimpse of several black figures skulking along under cover of the stringy barks, following their steps.

CHAPTER XX

A SAD HOME-COMING

MR. and Mrs. Paynter were riding the last stage of the journey from Geraldton ; and although it was Mr. Paynter who was the invalid, it was Mrs. Paynter who was most troubled to sit her horse during those last miles, before the familiar grounds of Woolla station came into view.

It was the saddest home-coming that she had ever known ; and although she wore the letter sent to her by Jimmy's father close to her heart, she could not believe that he would be able to find and bring back the children, who had been so mysteriously spirited away.

The father and mother had said very little to each other during their long, long ride up from the coast. Only when the first fence of Woolla station had been passed, and the horses quickened their pace, the two looked at each

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other, saying in the same breath almost, "Will there be any news?"

"How surprised they will be to see us home again so soon," Mrs. Paynter remarked, after another short silence.

"But for my unlucky accident all this other trouble might have been spared," groaned poor Mr. Paynter, for about the five hundredth time.

"My dear, I don't think that your accident, or my absence, brought the trouble or even heightened it," Mrs. Paynter said quietly. "Ellie and Tom would have done the same, doubtless, if I had been at Woolla. Oh dear, how neglected the place looks!" she exclaimed ruefully, as they rode into view of the cultivated grounds and saw the crops pretty well buried in weeds.

"What can you expect, when they must have been so fearfully short-handed," Mr. Paynter said, then was silent again, until catching sight of a figure away in the distance, he sent out a shrill coo-e-e, so long drawn out that it seemed to reach to the far horizon.

Back came an answering call; the figure was seen to scramble on to a horse that was

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waiting, and then the horse came on at a smart pace to meet them.

"It is one of the girls, it is Bertha!" cried Mrs. Paynter, with a little sob.

Bertha it was too, and she sent out such a glad shout of welcome on recognizing them, that her mother decided the home-coming might have some joy in it after all, despite the pain.

"Father, and mother too! We didn't expect you for days yet, but what a relief it will be to have you home again; half our troubles will be over," sighed Bertha, in profound satisfaction.

"Have you heard anything of the children?" asked Mrs. Paynter.

Bertha plunged into the story of the black cockatoo, then told them that Stevie, Bert Tuckwell, and Biboo, had only waited for a fresh stock of provisions and horses, then had ridden off again in search of the camp by the stone pillar, where the children were detained.

"Biboo says there is more than one tall stone sticking up in the middle of a plain. But judging from the place where Stevie saw the bootmarks, he believes he can ride straight for the place, and that it won't take more than

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two days to reach it. They started yesterday morning. They only came home the night before. Joyce, Mr. Sparkin and I stayed up all night getting food cooked and packed, for they reckon that at the quickest they must be away five days," said Bertha, as she edged her horse in between the other two, and rode in the middle.

"Up all night? How tired you must have been! It is about time I came home again, if only to look after you girls," Mrs. Paynter said.

"There was no help for it, mother, and it did not hurt us a bit, not half so much as the wearing uncertainty has done. Mr. Sparkin brought the water in for us, made the fire, and heated the oven. It was cooler than working in the day," replied Bertha, who looked older and more womanly in her mother's eyes.

"Did Stevie seem very tired?" Mrs. Paynter asked anxiously, for Stevie had sometimes shown himself not very strong, and mostly broke down under any heavy strain, although he might always be depended on to do the very best he could.

"Stevie looks like an old man, his face is

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all lines and wrinkles, his eyes are screwed up as if he were continually trying to keep himself from crying, and he is as thin as a bulrush," Bertha spoke with so much energy that her father could not help smiling, heavy as was his heart.

"You are not very fat, and your eyes are screwed up, too," he replied kindly.

"I know," she said softly, putting up a hand to flick away the tears that would come. "But we cannot help crying when we think of Tom and Ellie. I think, although Stevie looks so thin, it is Joyce who suffers most, for he can ride here and there looking for them, but she has to stay at home and wait, which is worse; she looks just like a ghost, but she will be happier now that you have both come home."

Neither father nor mother could trust themselves to answer, but rode for a few moments in silence, until the cultivated grounds were passed and they were half-way across the great paddock.

"There is Dodge!" cried Mrs. Paynter, in great excitement, as a small figure in a very big hat was seen perched on the fence rails.

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"Dodge has been such a good boy ; he takes lovely care of Jimmy. The two are great friends, only he spoils the baby by letting him have all his own way."

Mr. Paynter sent out another long cooey, and was answered by a delighted scream from Dodge, who set off running back towards the homestead as fast as his feet could carry him.

"Ah, Dodge knew it was father coming ; no one can cooey like father. I knew it directly, although I hardly dared believe it could be true," said Bertha, smiling happily, although the tears were still wet on her eyelashes.

Joyce came running to meet her father and mother, carrying Jimmy in her arms. The baby was rosy from its noonday sleep, and looked so jolly and happy that Mrs. Paynter exclaimed with delight at his appearance.

The sight of Jimmy made her think of the letter sent her by Jimmy's father, and which she pulled out and showed to Joyce and Bertha.

"But how could any one hope to find the children by setting out from Geraldton ? Why, everything points to their having gone due north," Joyce exclaimed.

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"We made inquiries in the town the morning we came away, and found that Charlie Montcalm and a stranger had started over night for Port Gregory, taking horses and provisions with them. They went in a coasting tug, so it was plain they intended to strike inland from that point, and work back towards Woolla. I had not much hope that they would be able to do anything, when I first read the letter; but since Bertha told us of the black cockatoo, it is quite possible that Charlie Montcalm and Jimmy's father may be able to find the children, even if Stevie and his party fail," Mrs. Paynter said, more hopefully than she felt, being anxious to lift the cloud of depression which hung so heavily on the face of her eldest daughter.

The two had gone into the house together, leaving Bertha and Dodge to help Mr. Paynter in unsaddling the horses.

"Mother, don't blame me too much; I have suffered so sorely through it all!" cried Joyce, sitting down and beginning to weep.

"My dear child, why should I blame you, or Stevie either; you could not help the children going," the mother said, in a soothing tone,

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taking poor tired Joyce in her arms and crooning over her as if she were a baby like Jimmy, who at that moment was sitting on the saddle of Mr. Paynter's horse, holding on to the horse's mane, chuckling and crowing with delight, like the young Australian that he was.

"If I had not slept so soundly, I must have heard Ellie get up and creep away, then I could have stopped her," Joyce answered, with a sigh, so much comforted by the feel of the dear motherly arms about her, that the troubles seemed only about half as big as they were before.

"My dear, Ellie and Tom had planned to do something, nothing very bad, perhaps; indeed, I expect they thought it would be very useful, and they would have got away somehow, in spite of being watched. It was very wrong of them, of course, but, poor children, how sorely they have been punished!"

"Poor children!" sighed Joyce, then mother and daughter cried together a little, after which both felt better and able to take up the burden of life again with cheerfulness and patience.

Mrs. Paynter changed her riding-habit for

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a cotton dress, then went out to the cookhouse and took up the burden of daily life, just about as if she had not been away at all, while Joyce flew about doing all sorts of things with a courage and energy which had been impossible a few hours before.

Bertha went off with her father to Bandicoot Gully, leaving Dodge as usual in charge of Jimmy, who cried dolefully for a while because he was taken off the horse.

A ride on the back of Bruno restored him to happiness, however, then Dodge put him in the waggon, and calling the dogs set off to round up the geese, so that one might be caught and killed for supper that evening. The return of father and mother necessitated some change from the mutton of their everyday fare.

The goose being caught and despatched by Bruno, Dodge carried it off to a shady place, and had just finished picking it when some one came riding across the paddock at a tearing rate, cooeing as if something tremendously good had taken place.

Dodge sent back an answering cooeey in a very wavering tone, then rushed off to the house

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to tell his mother and Joyce that some one was coming with news of the children.

Of course they hurried out in great excitement, only to meet with disappointment, however, for the new arrival was only Sam Tuckwell, who had just returned from his volunteer police work, and hearing from some one that his store was burned, and his brother for the time living with the Paynters at Woolla, had come on there to find him.

But he knew nothing about the children, not even that they were missing, so Dodge for once had been very far out in his guessing.

Sam had ridden far and seen much in his travels, but chiefest of all he had helped to catch the cattle-duffers, and was jubilant over his success.

"Bagged the whole lot of them, we did, as close as wax, the neatest catch I ever saw, and not a shot fired either, for we got the drop on them before they knew we were anywhere within a mile of their hiding-place."

"Caught them all, did you?" asked Mrs. Paynter, with a sound of hurry and uncertainty in her tone.

"All but one, who never ought to have been

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with them, and would not if only he had had fair play," replied Sam, who was sitting on a bench by the kitchen table, taking a meal in the rough, because he had ridden far without feeding, and was very hungry.

"Who was that?" Mrs. Paynter asked, stealing a sidelong look at Joyce, whose face had also gathered a worried expression, for both were thinking of Jimmy's father.

"A man named Norris Rushden. He had squatted on some land out Nicholson way, got part of it fenced, built a house, and had got some cattle there. Then one day a prospector found gold-bearing quartz on the place; it was proved that Rushden had no claim to the location, so he was bundled out neck and crop, his house burned down and his cattle driven off. The worry of it killed his wife, and he was left destitute with a young baby on his hands. Scandalous injustice, I call it, and I would not have arrested him if I had been as close to him as I am to you."

"Poor fellow, where is he now?" asked Mrs. Paynter, with a little smile quivering on her lips, as she looked across at Joyce, who smiled back.

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"I don't know; he wasn't with the gang when we caught them, I am glad to say, so nothing can be proved against him," Sam answered, then took up a great mug of tea and drained it to the bottom.

CHAPTER XXI

GOING THE OTHER WAY

WHEN Yarra said with that wise shake of her tousled head that they must go by another way home, because of the black fellow who camped on the cart-track, it really seemed an easy thing to do, just to make a detour of a few miles and pick the cart-track up again further on.

Tom seemed so much better from the long rest that for the first mile or two he got on quite bravely, although he needed so many drinks from the water-bottle, that Ellie and Yarra had to manage with as little drink as possible, so that there should be more for him.

All this time they had carefully avoided crossing any open spaces, creeping along where possible by the skirts of the forest, not venturing into the sombre depths through fear of losing their way and returning on their tracks.

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When Tom grew tired and began to show signs of feverish symptoms again, Yarra made him lie down under some protecting wattle bushes, and leaving Ellie to take care of him, set off to forage for supper.

She had decided that they must have a fire to-night, despite the risk; but as they were now in a thickly-wooded part of the country, there was less danger of the smoke being seen. If only herself had been concerned, Yarra would certainly not have lighted a fire, since a supper of raw frogs or uncooked caterpillars would have been no especial hardship to her. But it was different with these two white children, whom she had taken under her protection; she had often seen Ellie shiver and shrink from eating frogs even when nicely cooked, and her instinct told her that the little white girl would have no supper at all if it were not first cooked.

While Ellie gathered sticks and twigs in a heap for the fire, Yarra knelt over it rapidly twirling a sharpened stick in a groove notched in another stick, which speedily produced a little rain of sparks that set fire to the heap of leaves and twigs. Then leaving Ellie to tend

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this, Yarra started off to see what the forest would produce in the shape of supper.

It was not very much that she could find, although she hunted until the approach of sundown warned her to hurry back to the camping-place. A few handfuls of bardis, and a great heap of unwholesome looking fungus were all that had rewarded her search ; but when one has fasted for twenty-four hours save for a handful of berries, even a little food is better than none, and Yarra was very hungry indeed.

So was Ellie, and sat crouched by the little fire of sticks, thinking ruefully of the food at Woolla, the big loaves of bread which her mother and Joyce used to make, the damper which was so nice eaten hot, and the savoury smell of roast goose or baked mutton, which always hung about the cook-house at supper-time.

But the thought of the good abundant food brought with it also the recollection of how the dear home people had looked as they bustled to and fro preparing the meals ; then Ellie forgot her hunger in her bitter home-sickness, and hiding her face in her hands, wept a little because she was so very forlorn.

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It was while she was thus employed that Yarra came back with the meagre supper, and raking open the embers of the fire carefully deposited the heaps of caterpillars on the hot ashes.

"What have you got, bardis? Oh I am glad; they are so much nicer than frogs," Ellie said, brightening a little at the prospect of supper.

"There are only enough bardis for him," and Yarra jerked her head in the direction of Tom, who was sleeping from sheer exhaustion. "He's sick, and can't eat much, so must have the best; we've got that," and she nodded towards the heap of fungus lying on the ground.

"What? Why it is poison isn't it?" asked Ellie, dubiously.

She had seen that kind of fungus growing on the trunks of trees in marshy places on Woolla station, but had never dreamed that any one would eat things which looked so repulsive.

"There are nicer things, but if you haven't got 'em you have to go without," replied Yarra, with the contentment that made the most of what she had got, instead of grumbling that it was not better.

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She had acquired so many words in English now that she could talk quite comfortably to her companions, only of course she had to help out her meaning by lapses into dialect or by nods and shakes of her head.

Fortunately they were not on this night short of water, Yarra having found a water-hole close to where the fungi grew, so they made up for the shortness of food by long drinks at the old water-bottle.

Yarra was so tired that she dropped asleep directly her supper was finished, and lay curled up on the ground like a little black kitten.

But Ellie could not sleep, because Tom moaned and cried so much in his sleep. He must be very ill again she felt sure, by the burning heat of his hands and the evident pain of his head.

She got a fine scare later on in the night, when Tom had become quieter and she herself was getting drowsy; a stick cracked as if trodden on, then, as she opened her eyes and stared curiously about her, wondering where the sound came from, a dark figure crouching and creeping slid out of the gloom of the

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undergrowth, and made its way towards where Yarra was lying asleep.

For a moment Ellie watched it, struck dumb and helpless by sheer terror, then it came into her head that this must be one of the blacks who had stalked them so far, and was now going to seize Yarra as a prisoner.

But if Yarra was taken away, what would become of Tom and herself? They had no skill in tracking down water-holes such as Yarra showed, nor could they find food in the desert to keep them from starving, until civilization should be reached again.

The desperation of their condition broke down at last the paralysis of terror, and throwing up her hands she shrieked, until she made the silent forest ring with sound. At her very first cry, the black figure went bounding back into the shadows again, and then she saw that it was no man whom she had espied creeping out of the undergrowth, but a big dingo searching curiously round in the hope of finding a supper.

Even then the knowledge did not tend to re-assurance, for the wild dingoes were savage and fierce, while the animal, which would slay and devour a sheep, would not hesitate about

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making a meal of a few stray children wandering in the wilderness.

Yarra, who had sprung up in alarm at the first sound of Ellie's voice, came running to her trying to stop the outcry, while Tom sat up and in a whimpering protesting tone demanded to know what all the row was about.

"Ums hear you make big shout, come find, then all no go to run away no more," Yarra said impatiently; then finding no way of stopping Ellie's outcry by persuasion, tried what force would do, clapping a small black hand over her mouth and shaking her violently.

This speedily had the desired effect, as panting, sobbing, and wholly exhausted Ellie lay on the ground, shedding tears of utter misery.

"We'll be having ums down on us like a dingo on a sheep pen now," muttered Yarra, in a worried tone, peering about at the black shadows, as if expecting to see them start into life.

"Couldn't we start off and walk ever so far, then when the black-fellows came stalking round and found our fire they wouldn't find us?" suggested Tom, who, white and shivering, had

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risen to his feet, where he stood swaying helplessly to and fro, until Ellie jumped up and put her arms round him.

"Yes, Yarra, let us go, anything will be better than sitting here expecting the blacks to pounce upon us out of the woods," she said pleadingly; and because they both desired it so much, Yarra gave way, although she was by no means sure of the direction in which they ought to go, or the kind of impediments they might have to face in the way.

"What is that?" asked Tom nervously, as, slinging the French horn over his back, he gripped tightly hold of Ellie's arm, setting forward with a determination which was so greatly in excess of his bodily strength.

They all paused to listen, then the faint distant sound being repeated, Ellie declared that it sounded just like "Hulloa!"

"It isn't that, it is 'Yahoo, yahoo,' which means one lot of blacks calling to another," Yarra explained, in great excitement, speaking in dialect which at first the other two had great difficulty in understanding.

"Then they are saying they know where to find us. Oh, Tom, let us hurry; it would be

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horrible to have them catch us again," panted Ellie.

They plunged forward in the darkness with all speed then, Yarra holding Tom up on one side, while Ellie supported him on the other.

Fortunately the country just there was fairly open, and saving one or two falls from stumbling over roots, they got on quite nicely, a creeping chill of cold in the air warning them that dawn was not very far off.

They heard no more shouts in the distance; the forest dropped into silence again, until the sweet notes of the break-o'-day boy woke the world up to begin another day in good earnest.

Just as the sun rose, the three weary little travellers reached the edge of a dense thicket of "iron-bark" trees, and entering this, plunged forward for perhaps a quarter of a mile, then stopped in a spot where the trees grew more thinly, and made preparations for lighting a fire.

There was little danger of smoke rising above the foliage of the iron-barks, and a fire would be an unspeakable comfort if only something could be found to cook for breakfast.

While Tom gathered leaves and sticks for

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the fire, the two girls hunted for food, Yarra soon returning with a small snake and two frogs. Ellie, who came back later, had only a few berries as her share towards the meal.

But the food, poor in quality and meagre in quantity though it was, did them good, and when they had rested for about an hour, they decided to go onward again, for surely every mile now should bring them nearer to civilization and home.

There was a long climb when the thicket of iron-barks were left behind, and the worst of it was the ascent had to be made in the open, while of choice they would rather have crept from cover to cover like bandicoots or wallabies.

The heat of the sun pouring down on Tom soon made him so ill that he just lay down, declaring that he could go no further.

"Whatever shall we do?" cried Ellie, in dismay, looking to Yarra for counsel and advice.

She was flushed and perspiring from the stiff climb in the sun, but it would be hotter presently, and Tom could not possibly be allowed to lie out on that exposed hillside in the sweltering heat of noonday.

But Yarra's keen eyes were at that moment

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fixed on something that moved in and out of the thicket of iron-barks in which they had eaten their morning meal, and her heart gave a great thump as she realized that the something was a black-fellow.

"We must carry ums; it isn't far to the top now," she said, shuddering a little because of the sight she had seen, yet saying nothing about it to Ellie.

Crossing and clasping their hands to form a seat, the two girls made Tom slip an arm round each of their necks, then struggled onward up the slope, reaching the top at last, then paused a minute to get their breath, while they gazed downward into the valley before them.

A cry of dismay broke from both then, for away down below, where a little river crept along, they saw a number of blacks hurrying to and fro.

CHAPTER XXII

STALKING, AND BEING STALKED

THE situation was getting unpleasant, for two nights and a day Charlie Montcalm and Mr. Whiskers had been trying to find out what the blacks were doing, but all the time had been conscious that they themselves were being stalked in turn, every movement being closely watched.

They did not dare both sleep at once, but while one rested the other sat gun in hand, ready for whatever might happen.

Then on the second morning one of the horses was found dead, with a spear stuck right through its body, and then from being merely unpleasant the situation became intensely critical, for what could two white men and one horse do in a strange country surrounded on all sides and constantly watched by hostile blacks.

"Charlie, my boy, do you realize that we

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are in a very tight place indeed ? " asked Mr. Whiskers, as he surveyed the body of the dead horse.

" There is not much room to move about, I will admit," replied Charlie, with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

" Just so, and I should propose making a bolt of it, and trusting to our legs and our luck to get through, but for one thing," said Mr. Whiskers.

" And that ? " there was a smile on Charlie's easy, good-natured face as he put his query.

" That little bit of pink ribbon, my boy. We've got to see this thing through, however hot it grows ; you will remember that."

" I will remember," said Charlie, in a solemn tone as if he were taking a vow, and so he was, for the sight of Mrs. Paynter's drawn, despairing face was before his eyes as he spoke, and he was telling himself that he would rather not go back at all than have to admit he had failed.

" That is settled then. Now what is the next thing to be done ? " and Mr. Whiskers stared at the dead horse, as if he were asking the poor inanimate creature to solve for them the problem of their next move.

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"Move camp, I should say, and on to higher ground, if possible; we should see more about where we were then, I imagine," said Charlie, and walking up to the other horse, commenced to load on it the two saddles and their small stock of provisions.

"There's a likely place up there," remarked Mr. Whiskers, pointing to a hollow curving into the hills halfway up the steep ascent and shaded by one old banksia tree.

"The identical place," declared Charlie. "There is only one defect, as far as I can see, and that is all our comings and goings will be so plainly visible to our black friends down here in the valley. By the way, I wonder what all the noise was about in the night?"

"What sort of noise?" demanded Mr. Whiskers, with a start.

He had been so busy bemoaning the loss of his horse, that he had had no time hitherto for asking Charlie about the latter part of the night.

"First of all there was a shrill screaming from somewhere, but so faint and far away that I could not tell whether the noise was made by man, or bird, or beast, then from somewhere

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else I heard a call, 'Yahoo, yahoo,' after which there came an answering shout from these pleasant and friendly neighbours of ours in the swamp, then came silence until the birds began."

"Charlie, are you sure where the screaming was: from which part of the compass, I mean?" Mr. Whiskers asked hoarsely.

"No, I'm not. I thought at first it was a night bird, because it seemed to come from the sky; it was only when I heard the blacks shouting that I guessed it might mean something," Charlie replied.

"Ah, from the sky; that means the noise may have dropped down from over the hill, so we'd better move camp at once, then when things are settled a bit comfortably one can keep house, and the other can prospect a little. It is my opinion that things are going to be rather exciting to-day."

The two men went to work in good earnest, the horse was well loaded, and then they loaded themselves.

"What about that poor beast; it isn't over fat, but we may have leaner meat or none before we have done?" Charlie asked.

"Better go hungry altogether than eat that;

Stalking, and Being Stalked

I fancy. There are such things as poisoned spears, you know. But we shall very soon know for certain whether or no I have misjudged them ; if I have they will swoop down like a flock of vultures on the carcase, for a meat feast like that lean old horse is not to be despised, and they will pick the bones clean ; if, however, the spear was poisoned, they won't come near, then the flies and the carrion birds will have it all their own way."

Charlie nodded in silent but horrified understanding, and then, their belongings being all gathered up, they slowly made the ascent of the hill until they reached the little narrow terrace where grew the banksia tree.

They were above the reach of chance spears now, and although the situation was rather exposed and far from the water, it was plainly the best spot they could choose for the present.

When their property had been arranged to their satisfaction, and the horse hobbled in the shade where there was grass to eat, the two men sat down to watch the blacks and wait developments.

The native encampment appeared to be in a great state of excitement about something

The Black Cockatoo

or other on this particular morning, and every one was working as hard as possible. Some were filling water-bottles made of wallaby skins at the little river meandering through the valley, others were hunting for frogs in the swampy places, or grubbing for roots with which to fill the food-bags.

"They are preparing to march on again, I should say," remarked Mr. Whiskers, after a long hour of silence, during which he had been lying flat on the ground surveying the doings of the blacks through a small but powerful field glass.

"But the men aren't there," objected Charlie. "Don't you remember that we haven't seen a full-grown man about ever since we have been spying on them, and they would hardly start on again until the men put in an appearance."

"I tell you what is in my mind," said Mr. Whiskers. "I believe the children were with this lot, witness the pink ribbon, but they got away, bolted in fact, and the men went off in search. The screaming you heard in the night may have come from the children, then the distant calls, echoed back by our friendly neighbours, were to announce the recapture

Stalking, and Being Stalked

and the speedy arrival of the men-folk, when all must be in readiness to move on."

"What will you do?" demanded Charlie breathlessly, while his hands clenched and unclenched, his eyes shone, and his breath came in loud quick pantings.

"I shall fight, if necessary," announced Mr. Whiskers, with an air of slow enjoyment.

Charlie was opening his mouth to say that he also could fight, that indeed there was nothing else he so much desired to do just then, but the words were never uttered, for at that moment there was a shrill cry from the hill above them, and looking up the two men saw a sight which, for the moment, rendered them speechless with amazement.

Standing out on the bluff of the hill, their figures outlined against the deep blue of the sky, were three children, the centre one of whom had to be supported by the other two.

Just then the blacks moving about in the river valley, caught sight of the children too, setting up such a chorus of fierce yelling that a grown-up well-armed person might have been forgiven a pang of terror at the sound, while to the defenceless children on the hill the

The Black Cockatoo

noise must have seemed truly dreadful and appalling.

Only for a moment were the two men speechless, then as the children wheeled round, as if to turn and flee back by the way they had come, Mr. Whiskers raised his rifle and fired in the air, while Charlie shouted at the top of his voice, "Ellie, Ellie, Tom, Tom, come here, there is nothing to be afraid of!"

But after all it was the report of the rifle which arrested their attention, for with all the yelling in the valley below, it is exceedingly doubtful whether the sound of Charlie's voice even reached their ears.

As it was, Yarra, who knew that there were pursuers stalking them in the rear, and that in consequence safety did not lie in that direction, turned sharply about again at the sound of the rifle, and then for the first time, espied the horse and the two men under the banksia tree.

"Look, look, ums white men down there!" she shrilled, the relief and joy in her tone bringing comfort to the others, who did not at the first minute see or understand what it was which had brought so much satisfaction to her.

Charlie Montcalm started to run up the hill,

Stalking, and Being Stalked

which at that part was so steep as to be almost precipitous, in order to help the children down, to cover their coming with his rifle if need be, since he did not know what danger might be menacing them from the rear.

Mr. Whiskers stayed where he was, for the blacks in the valley were coming pouring up the slope, as if they meant to rush the situation, but a shot from the rifle might stop them, only, as he could not risk killing women and children however savage and cruel they might be, he fired into the air instead.

The noise and the menace of the shot stopped the women ; they plainly understood what guns were for, and that it might be wise not to get within range of possible bullets.

So absorbed was Mr. Whiskers in his task of keeping the women back, that he dared not look round to see if Charlie had reached the children and induced them to come down.

The black women had started screaming again, and were filling the air with a hideous uproar that was enough to shake one's nerves to rags.

Twice he had shot into the air, then finding that the women were beginning to think that a

The Black Cockatoo

gun which only made a noise could not after all be very dangerous, and were moving up in determined fashion, Mr. Whiskers took aim at a dog that trailed along by the side of a specially fierce-looking old woman and shot the creature dead.

Instantly a wild outburst of shrieks and cries burst from the blacks; probably the loss of the dog affected them more than if a couple of women had been killed, for the dog had been trained for hunting down game, and so was a valued possession, while women were regarded as being worth almost nothing at all.

Mr. Whiskers smiled; it would have gone very much against the grain with him if he had been compelled to shoot a woman, but if there had been no dog available, he must have done it, in order to keep the howling mob at a safe distance.

He was still intently watching his work, and smiling at the effect of it, when he started in surprise, as a shrill voice at his elbow exclaimed, "It is ums lubbra's boss. Boss, boss, where ums lubbra gone?"

"Yarra?" cried Mr. Whiskers, with a great start. "You baggage, how did you come here?"

Stalking, and Being Stalked

Yarra grinned delightedly, then overcome by some passion of grief long hidden and repressed, she flung herself at his feet, sobbing in great distress.

"Ums bad black-fellow steal poor Yarra all away, then her own folks run off and let her be stealed. Then ums good little white children be stealed too, and ums help ums go home the other way."

"Poor little Yarra!"

Mr. Whiskers let his hand drop in a kindly pat on the black girl's tousled head, then he turned to greet Ellie and Tom, who were coming down the hill, helped by Charlie Montcalm.

"Look out!" yelled Charlie, and Mr. Whiskers turned about again, but only just in time, for the blacks were coming on at a rush, and now it was not a dead dog that would serve to keep them back.

CHAPTER XXIII

JUST IN TIME

BIBOO was on his mettle in the second expedition, and having a definite point to aim at, set out for it by the straightest possible course.

Bert Tuckwell and Stevie had each a pack-horse to lead this time, for they had brought sufficient provisions to admit of their staying away for weeks if necessary. Biboo had nothing but his own horse to take charge of, and indeed could not have looked after more if he had tried, seeing that half the time he was running beside his horse or in front of it or behind it, in search of something which might prove of help in tracking.

Striking a course from that point where the boot-marks had been found by the pool in the river bed, Biboo led them almost straight over rough ground and smooth. Once or twice he

Just in Time

paused where the scorched and blackened herbage showed where a fire had been, and triumphantly demonstrated the fact that he was leading them on a right trail, for here were the fires by which the blacks had cooked their food.

At last, one evening just before sundown, they toiled wearily up a long incline to see spread out before them, further than eye could reach, a vast plain, sandy and apparently waterless, but dotted here and there with big boulders and spinifex, which last is a prickly growth dreaded alike by man and beast.

"There, see, stands the pillar; the water-holes are close to it at the bottom of the mound," said Biboo, in his native dialect, which fortunately both the others understood fairly well.

"Where?" gasped Stevie, rising in his stirrups to gaze out over the plain, yet seeing nothing save a limitless distance of sand and spinifex.

Bert also could see nothing, but then he was always short-sighted, so that did not count for much.

Both he and Stevie, however, were anxious to push on as fast as the horses could go, in the

The Black Cockatoo

hope of reaching the hill with the stone pillar in the shortest possible time, but this Biboo would not hear of.

"Miles, miles!" he shouted, throwing up his hands in a manner meant to express great distance. "Miles and no water at all. The horses must be rested, watered, and fed, then we go forward at a rush and early reach the spot where the tall stone stands on the hill."

"Biboo is right, Stevie old man, and the moon will serve nicely for us to start on again, between two and three o'clock in the morning," Bert said, slipping from his saddle and leading the tired horses down to the dry bed of a river, which, when there was water enough, meandered along the edge of the great plain.

A few minutes of active digging in the river bed made a hollow in which water began to gather; and satisfied that the needs of the horses could be met, Bert and Stevie turned their attention to their own supper, while Biboo nosed up and down like a terrier dog looking for a rat.

Lighting a fire under shelter of a row of gum trees, marking out the course of the river when there was one, they boiled a billy of tea, and

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calling to Biboo to come and eat, began on their supper just as the darkness fell.

Biboo came to his supper in a very dissatisfied frame of mind, grunting and growling, declaring that there was no fireglow visible from the hill of the stone pillar, so the blacks and the children must have gone further away.

"What does that matter, we can follow them," said Bert, in a testy tone. "We can follow them, and since a horse can go so much faster than a man, we may reasonably hope to catch them up too."

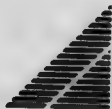
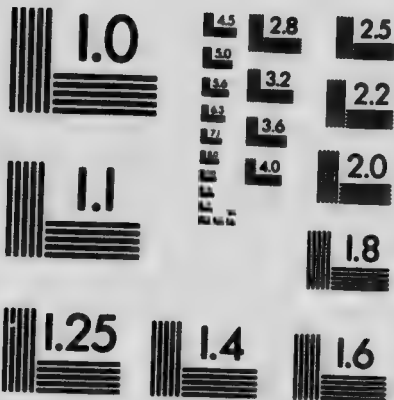
Biboo grunted something inaudible, and gobbled his supper as an extra hungry wild animal might have done; then, when the darkness dropped like a black curtain over the landscape, he sat with his nose resting on his knees, staring away at the distant horizon.

Stevie was very quiet, his haggard young face looking drawn and grey in the flickering light of the camp fire. He felt that he should never know happiness or content again until the children were found, and he would thankfully have toiled on and on until he dropped from sheer exhaustion, if only the other two would have let him.



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The Black Cockatoo

It was simply maddening to be compelled to unsaddle, to eat one's supper and lie down to sleep, while all the time somewhere out in the darkness of that wide plain, Ellie and Tom were waiting and watching with weary eyes for the rescue which tarried so long in the coming.

Biboo insisted on taking the first watch, although as a rule he refused to watch at all; but circumstances alter cases, and to-night the black tracker did not consider either of his white companions clever enough for the task.

Bert and Stevie lay down together, expecting to be roused as soon as Biboo got tired of staring at the black landscape. They slept soundly, as people are apt to do who spend long hours of active work in the open air, and when at length Biboo roused them the moon was up and sending a flood of silvery radiance all over the plain.

"Why, it is time to start, and you have had no sleep," exclaimed Bert, in annoyed surprise, for he supposed that now they would have to wait while Biboo took a prolonged nap to make up for so much watching.

"Me want no sleep," snorted the black tracker, in disgust. "To sleep here would be to ask for death, since no white man can hope

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to see where danger lurks but Biboo, if black-fellow come sneaking round."

"Have you seen or heard anything of any wandering blacks in the night?" asked Stevie, trying to get very wide-awake all at once, but failing signally.

Biboo shook his head. He had been listening in a strained fashion through many hours, expecting to hear the creeping approach of a hostile black and the hiss of a hurtling spear.

But the hours had gone by in utter silence, not even a dingo had howled within a mile of the camp fire, and Biboo was beginning to feel that he had been defrauded of his night's rest to no purpose, and in consequence was not disposed to be specially amiable.

The horses were saddled, and then in bright moonlight, which made the going almost as easy as by day, the party set forward into the plain, steering straight for the tall stone pillar which Biboo professed to be able to see, even in the uncertain light of the moon.

The sun was high in the heavens before they reached the mound, whereon stood the tall stone, but they found only the disappointment prophesied by Biboo, for the place was silent

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and deserted, only the ashes of camp fires and a litter of bones showing that the ground about the water-hole had recently served as a temporary home.

"Gone?" exclaimed Stevie, his tone having a hollow, mournful ring, which made Bert cough suddenly, and then to become quite unreasonably irritable.

"Of course they are gone; it wasn't to be expected that they would hang round, waiting for us to come up with them. We can push on after them though, and it won't be our fault nor yet Biboo's, if we don't overhaul them in a day or two."

The black-tracker was busy investigating the ashes of the camp fires, and after poking his fingers right into the centre of the ash heaps, decided that they had not been deserted more than three days, which was good hearing, since a heavily encumbered party travelling on foot, and having food to hunt for as they went, could not possibly travel very fast.

The tracks of their going were easy to follow, and after an hour's rest, with a good drink of water at the water-hole, the party were in the saddle again and moving back across the plain,

Just in Time

almost by a parallel line to which they had come, only in a more westerly direction.

This puzzled Biboo a good deal, for, as he argued, why should the blacks have travelled so far across that wide plain, resting days at the water-hole, if only to come back so nearly on their own tracks again, especially as the wide unexplored region beyond the plain was known to be their own country, from which they must have come on their travels south.

"Perhaps they lost something, and had to come back to look for it," suggested Bert, with a burst of laughter, hoping by his merriment to raise the spirits of Stevie, who appeared to grow more wretched with every hour that passed.

"Ah, perhaps they did!" exclaimed Biboo, who took the matter seriously; then he leaped from his horse again and ran ahead for a mile, his head down, and his sharp eyes carefully examining the tracks.

At the end of the mile he mounted his horse again, his face dripping with perspiration, but radiant with satisfaction, for he had satisfied himself on a very important subject, and felt that he had a right to feel elate.

The Black Cockatoo

"All gins and black lubbras go this way ; no men go here, no white children with boots," he explained, with many flourishes of his hands, and much wagging of his head.

"Are you sure ? " demanded Stevie, with a start.

"Biboo is always sure when he speaks," the tracker answered, with a dignity that was comic, only the others were not light-hearted enough to see the humour of it.

"What are we to do then ? " cried Bert. "Perhaps the children have escaped from the blacks, so we are losing time in following this track."

"Children run away, men go to find them, gins move camp to better water-hole and wait," explained Biboo. Then with a wild flourish of his hands, and many chuckles he went on, "We find camp and wait ; men find children and bring back, then we be there just lovely for to see ! "

"Poor little souls ! " muttered Bert Tuckwell, gnawing at the moustache of which he was so proud ; but Stevie reeled in the saddle as if he would pitch from the horse.

"Steady, lad, steady, it may not be so bad

Just in Time

as we think, only now we are going to push on, as fast as we can go," Bert said encouragingly.

Stevie gave a nod by way of reply; then on they went again, urging the horses forward now at the best pace the tired beasts could make, though the day was fiercely hot, and the creatures tired with the long travel.

Hour after hour went by; they were back again in the hilly country bordering the plain, and it was nearly sundown.

"No use to go further; camp now, and try again to-morrow," said Biboo, whose poor horse looked as if at any moment it might drop in its tracks.

Just then, before either Bert or Stevie could reply, the report of a rifle rang out from somewhere not far away, followed by a frenzied chorus of shrieks and yells.

"Where does the row come from?" burst out Bert, in a breathless fashion, staring up and down.

"From over the hill, up yonder way," announced Biboo, whose eyes were gleaming with the light of battle, for the shrieks sounded like a fray, and all the wild man in him loved a fight.

The Black Cockatoo

"Come on, I'm going to see," announced Bert, with sharp energy; then slipping from his horse he commenced running up the hill, which was very steep just there, dragging his own mount and the pack horse after him.

Biboo, having only one horse to lead, soon worked to the front place and kept it, while Stevie came toiling along in the rear, leading his own horse and the second pack-horse.

Twenty minutes' hard, panting climb, and they all reached the top just as another shot rang out, then taking in the situation at a glance, burst into such a ringing British cheer, as effectually turned the tide of battle in the hollow of the hills a little further eastward.

What they saw was an old banksia growing in a curve in the line of the hill, sheltering behind its broad gnarled branches a huddled group of children, protected by two men with rifles, who stood one on either side, holding at bay a ring of blacks, whose spears dotted the space between.

Plainly they were closing in on the besieged, until the sight of the three people and five horses coming over the hill, together with the sound of that ringing hurrah, had warned them

Just in Time

it might be far more prudent to flee. Seeing them waver and hesitate, Bert yelled out another wild ringing shout, then flinging himself on to his horse again, rode forward along the hill, followed by the others.

"You were just in time," said Mr. Whiskers, with a sigh of relief; "Charlie and I hadn't more than two rounds more apiece, but we meant to take care they were not wasted."

"Seems as if you had been having a warm time; they won't all run away;" and Bert wagged his head towards some black objects lying away in the distance.

"No; but if it hadn't been them, it would have been us," Mr. Whiskers replied.

But Stevie had got one arm round Tom, and the other round Ellie, while Yarra stood in front attempting to explain the full course of their adventures, by saying—

"Ums ran away, but ums came after us, but ums shotted ums with a fire-stick."

However, the blacks did not venture another attack, and supper that night, for the children, at least, was a feast indeed.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOME SWEET HOME

MR. KNUTSFORD had ridden over from Shirley as fast as his fastest horse could carry him, and in his pocket a dead cockatoo, pure white with a sulphur crest. He had shot the bird that morning, then catching sight of something under its wing, had found secured there the pathetic little message sent by Tom and Elh.

But when he reached Woolla, it was to find his news very stale indeed, and to learn that two separate search parties were out on the tracks of the lost children.

Sam Tuckwell was at Woolla working for Mr. Paynter, and awaiting the return of Bert to commence building a new store. Mr. Knutsford also took a hand at the work that was nearest whilst he waited for his tired horse to get rested for the long return journey to Shirley.

Home Sweet Home

So it chanced that every one was busy, and no one on the watch to see when a little company of six tired and dusty horses came slowly across the great paddock, two of the horses having a double burden.

Then came a tremulous toot-a-too-a on a French horn, and at the sound Dodge, who had been looking for hens' eggs in the tall grass behind the shearing sheds, came tearing round the angle of the buildings, and yelling at the top of his voice.

Joyce, who had sent him to look for eggs, thought he had been bitten by a snake, and ran out in a great state of alarm to see what was the matter.

Then hearing the horn, she immediately forgot the possible snake-bite, and rushed along the banksia hedge, and past the garden, out to where a view of the paddock could be obtained.

"It must be good news!" she sobbed, as she ran, "they would not mock us with that wretched horn if any harm had come to the children."

Good news it was, too, although poor Tom was so weak and ill that he could not stand

The Black Cockatoo

on his own two feet, but had to be carried by Mr. Whiskers into the cool sitting-room, and laid on the couch in home sweet home.

The noise made by the others in tramping in after Mr. Whiskers and his burden, awoke Jimmy, who lay asleep in a corner on a rug, and as his babyship did not approve of such a sudden awakening, he burst into a lusty cry.

Mr. Whiskers dropped Tom on the couch with a jerk, and turned to Mrs. Paynter, trembling like a leaf.

She understood, and picking up the rosy, sobbing baby, put it in the man's arms.

"There is Jimmy, Mr. Rushden, and I little thought when I took him how richly you were going to repay me for our care of your baby," she said, her voice quavering to a breakdown, while the tears ran down her face.

Norris Rushden, standing with his baby in his arms, was trying to make some sort of reply, when Yarra, who had hitherto been silent, awed by the, to her, splendour of that homely room, burst out in wild delight—

"Lubbra, lubbra, ums Yarra's own lubbra," and dragging Jimmy by sheer force from his father's arms, whirled about in ecstasy, shaking

Home Sweet Home

the baby up and down like a bottle of medicine labelled to be well shaken before taken.

"Yarra lived r ar our hut, and my wife used to trust her wi the baby," Norris Rushden explained; then seeing that he was r own, and disguise was no longer necessary, he pulled off his big false whiskers, being rewarded by smiles and crowings from Jimmy, who now appeared to know his father again.

Great was the rejoicing at Woolla that day and the next, though Ellie cried bitterly when she restored the violin to Mr. Sparkin, and explained that she had lost the bow, at the same time begging him to forgive her for what looked so much like stealing.

Mr. Knutsford lingered a day or two at Woolla; then when he went back to Shirley, he took Norris Rushden with him, in order that a new start in life might be arranged for the man on whom ill-fortune had frowned so long.

Charlie Montcalm went too, declaring that he liked Mr. Whiskers so much as a partner, that they might as well stick together henceforth. But Jimmy remained at Woolla, with Yarra for his nurse.

The Black Cockatoo

Tom was very ill for a long time, both he and Ellie had suffered so much, that no one dreamed of flinging them a word of blame for all the misery that midnight prank of theirs had caused.

A black cockatoo in a glass case stands in the sitting-room at Woolla, the very bird that had the message fastened under its wing, which Dodge snared and Bruno killed. Mr. Sparkin stuffed it, and gave it to Mrs. Paynter, and if any of the young folks were ever tempted after that to do a risky thing on their own responsibility, the sight of the black cockatoo came as a useful reminder to act always on the open.

But Ellie and Tom needed no dead black cockatoo to remind them of the grave dangers through which they had come, and each in his and her way gave thanks for the good Providence which had delivered them from a peril so dreadful. It was they who taught Yarra to give thanks also for an escape as great as theirs, and the black girl was quick to respond to the teaching she received.

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